BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

TEMPLES AND LEGENDS OF KERALA

K. R. VAIDYANATHAN

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, MUMBAI 400 007

VISIT…

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By
K. R. Vaidyanathan

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

-Rigveda 1-89-i

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2016

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the younger generation who were uprooted from their native soil as their parents had to seek livelihood in cities and they were therefore deprived of their knowledge and experience of the rich heritage of the unique Kerala temples.

Srimukham

Translation

Asirvada for my dear disciple Vaidyanatha written with thoughts of Narayana.

In this holy land of Bharata there are many sacred temples. The learned hail that place as a *kshetra* which has been hallowed by the dust on the feet of the playful form assumed by Bhagavan, the protector of the world, to bless the devout. Bhagavan Vedavyasa has in the puranas spoken of the glory of such places. Those who have faith in the Lord visit these holy places, their inner spirit inspired by their concern for dharma.

There are many sacred temples in Kerala, a land sanctified by the Lord of Guruvayur, by the son of Hari and Hara and by the incarnation of Sankara Bhagavadpada. We are happy that a book has been written in English to acquaint the devout about such places. In it has been very well explained the importance of each temple; also each temple has been described along with an account of the special observances to be met with there. We are also delighted that the work is being published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. We wish the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan all prosperity by the grace of Sri Saradachandra-maulisvara.

With thoughts of Narayana.

Sri

(Jagadguru Sri Abhinava
Vidyateertha Swaminah Sankaracharya of
Sringeri Sarada Peetham)

Bombay
Dhundubhi Vaisakha,
Panchami,
Wednesday,
on Sankara Jayanti day 28-4-1982.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

As the author of books on two of the most prominent temples of Kerala - *Sri Krishna, The Lord of Guruvayur* and *Pilgrimage to Sabari* - which were fortunately well received by the public, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan thought I would be the natural choice for the series on temples which they are bringing out for different States. While I am grateful to the Bhavan for entrusting me with this noble task, I however found that the work involved was stupendous.

There are nearly 1,300 temples under the management of the Travancore Devaswom Board alone which controls temples in the erstwhile Travancore State. Similarly the Cochin Devaswom Board has nearly 400 temples in its jurisdiction in the former Cochin State. Then comes Malabar which too has hundreds of temples.

It would be humanly impossible, even if one devoted one's entire lifetime, to cover all these numerous temples each claiming some importance or other. It will not be possible to do justice even to all the major temples. The author was, therefore, compelled to confine his narratives to a few of the better known temples, the selection being of course very difficult. Even if those included in this work created an awareness among the devout of the rich heritage of temples that belongs to Kerala I would feel my labours amply rewarded.

The following books provided me with good reference material: *Mahakshetrangalku Mumpil* and *Kshetraprada-kshinam* by Nalamkel Krishna Pillai and published by Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, Kottayam; *Eithihyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni, published by Kottarathil Sankunni Memorial Committee, Kottayam; *A Survey of Kerala History* by A. Sreedhara Menon (Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society); *A Short History of Kerala* by Prof. K. V. Krishna Ayyar, *The Arts and Crafts of Kerala,* both published by Paico Publishing House, Cochin; *Monuments of Kerala* by H. Sarkar, Archaeological Survey of India; and *Splendours of Kerala,* a Marg publication. I am indebted to the authors/publishers of these works.

I am also extremely grateful to R.G.K., formerly of the *Illustrated Weekly of India,* for going through the manuscript critically and offering valuable suggestions.

Lastly, I offer my respectful obeisance to His Holiness Jagadguru Sankaracharya of Sringeri Sarada Peetham who has graciously blessed my humble work by granting *Srimukham.*

- K. R. Vaidyanathan

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1. INTRODUCTION

Of Kerala temples, Stella Kramrisch once wrote: “In this beauteous, bountiful country, between sea and mountains, green in the density of high trees and fertile land, the temples - 2,200 are in worship - are part of the scene”.

To an average Malayali, the day begins with a bath in the temple tank. He makes a dash to the temple with the *mundu* still wet and circumambulates the deity, chanting the Lord’s name. With his forehead, chest and arms smeared with ashes and sandal paste he emerges into the workaday world with the feeling that the day has begun well for him.

Indeed, despite the influence of Marxism and the philosophy of materialism, the gods and goddesses in Kerala seem more real than elsewhere. Malayali life is intimately associated with temples. All the time they invoke the names of popular deities like Guruvayurappan or Ayyappa. In times of trouble - which is unfortunately very often - they turn to their deities for relief and succour. The gods are even called to witness events like marriage, *annaprasanam* (feeding ceremony of the child) or any other important occurrence in the family.

Malayalis even take their gods wherever they go and settle. Thus you have Guruvayurappan or Ayyappa temples practically in all major cities in India and even abroad.

Until a few years ago temples in Kerala even offered food to the devotees, especially to those belonging to the upper castes. A major event in the temple is the annual festival which provides a special occasion for worship and opportunities for social rejoicing. Thousands turn up to watch elephants with colourful parasols and flying whisks held aloft them and to hear the playing of drums, music or participate in general merriment like fireworks, exhibitions, etc. Vendors and hawkers too gather and do brisk business.

Thus, “a temple in Kerala”, as K.P.S. Menon put it, “is at once a house of prayer, a social club and a cultural centre.” It plays a role in the lives of

people far more vital than any other institution.

Aryanisation of Kerala

How did Kerala become a land of temples and temple worship became so popular as to acquire a place of importance in religious and cultural lives of people? It was mainly due to the Aryanisation of Kerala which reached its climax in the 8th century A.D. with a major Brahmin influx from the North which led to the foundation of many Hindu temples with a view to popularising Hinduism. This was followed by the Bhakti movement popularised by Hindu saints, which created a mental and religious stir among people culminating in Sankaracharya's Advaita, in the 9th century.

Long before the advent of Aryans, people of ancient Kerala followed Dravidian practices which were not based on any particular religious philosophy. They worshipped totem gods and innumerable spirits inhabiting rivers, trees, hills, etc. There were local deities guarding the borders of villages and demons that caused diseases. They propitiated them by offering food to the accompaniment of music and dancing.

While the people were thus following Dravidian practices of worship, religions from the North, viz., Jainism, Buddhism and Brahminism entered Kerala in the centuries prior to the beginning of the Christian era. Though these religions gradually got converts among the people, the majority still continued to observe Dravidian practices. It will be interesting to see what impact each of these religions made on the people and how the Dravidians were ultimately absorbed within the fold of Hinduism by the incoming Aryans "by a general process of social assimilation and cultural synthesis."

Jainism

The Jain religion came to Kerala in the 3rd century B.C. On account of a great famine in North India in 297 B.C. it is believed a large number of Jains led by Chandragupta Maurya (321-297 B.C.) and the Jain Saint Bhadrabahu came to Sravanabelagola in Mysore. In course of time they spread all over South India.

Jainism enjoyed high prestige in Kerala in the early centuries of the Christian era and had royal patrons as well, notably in Ilango Adikal, better known for his Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*. He lived in Trikanamatilakam which became a famous centre of Jain religion and learning. There were several other Jain shrines too, which were subordinate to the one at Matilakam.

Even the Kutalmanikyam temple at Irinjalakuda, dedicated to Bharata is believed to have been originally a Jain shrine. It was converted into a Hindu temple like several other Jain shrines in Kerala, following the decline of Jainism which started in the 8th century thanks to the Saivite and Vaishnavite movements. Jainism seems to have lingered till the 16th century and then it almost disappeared. The only vestiges of Jainism in Kerala today are the Jain shrines at Kallil, Mundur, Palghat and Sultan's Battery. Besides some old Jain families live in the Wynad and Kasargod area in north Kerala.

Buddhism

Like Jainism, Buddhism also held sway in ancient Kerala during the reign of Asoka in the 3rd century B.C. Coming by sea, Buddhism was popular in coastal districts, Karumati, Mavelikkara, Bharanikkavu, Pallikkal, Karunagappalli, Idappalli, Dharmapattanam, Matayi and Pallikkunnu being its chief centres.

Many prominent Hindu temples of today like the Vadakkunnathan temple, Trichur, and the Kurumba Bhagawati temple, Kodungallur, and even the famous Ayyappa shrine atop Sabarimala are believed to have been at one time Buddhist shrines. The most important centre of Buddhist pilgrimage was Srimulavasam which is now under the sea.

The Buddhist religion also began to decline from the 8th century and finally disappeared in the 12th century following vigorous propaganda by Hindu reformers like Sankaracharya. Both Jainism and Buddhism which could not be easily distinguished from each other even by the learned, made very little appeal to the upper classes. Their strength lay among the comparatively backward classes. Even to them in course of time they tended to become less and less attractive.

On the other hand they were attracted by the *Bhajan* parties led by the Saiva Nayanars and the Vaishnava Alwars who went from place to place, chanting the Lord's name and singing and dancing in ecstatic joy. Buddhism and Jainism thus lost their appeal to the masses. While Jainism did hardly leave any impress on Kerala society, Buddhism was absorbed in Hinduism in respect of some of its ceremonies and forms of worship. The images, processions and *utsavams,* etc., associated with popular worship in present-day Hindu temples in Kerala are said to be a legacy of Buddhism. Even the *chakiyar kuttu* conducted in temples is said to be an adaptation of the Buddhist monk's religious exposition.

Impact of Aryanisation

Now we come to Aryanisation of Kerala which also began in the 3rd century B.C. following the advent of Jains and Buddhists. It was a slow but steady progress resulting in far-reaching changes in all spheres of human activity. The Aryan immigrants who were generally Brahmins and who stabilized themselves as the Nambudiris of Kerala were of two types. There were those who had taken up small trades and practically settled down in Kerala. Then there were small groups of the priestly class who began to enter Kerala in increasing numbers from the fifth century onwards. They succeeded in persuading the royalty to conduct ritual sacrifices for longevity and victory in war. They thus won the moral support and allegiance of the rulers. They also made them believe that protection of the Brahmins was an act of virtue on their part.

The increased influx of Aryans had its impact on the religious and cultural fields as well at a time when Jainism and Buddhism started declining. The new Aryan missionaries devoted all their attention to propaganda against Jainism and Buddhism whose hold on the people was a stumbling block to their ideological pursuits. They even resorted to iconoclasm of Buddhist images and *Viharas*.

At the same time the Nambudiris filled the land with Hindu temples which by their fixed times of worship enforced a wholesome discipline in the daily life of the people. In fact it has been rightly said that “the temple as an institution was an Aryan gift to South India.” Several temple arts and festivals were instituted to attract devotees. The worship of Hindu gods and goddesses like Vishnu, Siva, etc., were made popular.

Dravidian deities were transformed and absorbed into the Hindu pantheon. Thus the Dravidian Goddess Kottavai became Durga, Kali and Bhagawati. The popular non-Aryan deity Sasta came to be looked upon as Hariharaputra, the son of Vishnu (Hari) and Siva (Hara), in order to make Him acceptable not only to the Saivite and Vaishnavite sections of the Hindu population but also to the converts to Hinduism from within the Buddhist fold.

Thus the Hindu religion in Kerala was moulded by a synthesis of Aryan ideas from the North and Dravidian ideas from the South.

Bhakti Movement

It was during the period of Kulasekharas of the second Chera empire (800-1102 AD) - the golden age of ancient Kerala - that Hinduism made spectacular progress. This was due to the Bhakti movement in the 9th century and to the teachings of Sankaracharaya (788-820 A.D.). As already stated, the Bhakti movement was led by Saiva Nayanars like Appar and Sambandhar and the Vaishnava Alwars, like Thirumalisai and Thirumangai, who toured the land, kindling the religious fervour of the masses by their *Bhajan* or devotional parties and processions.

Of the sixty-three Nayanars, Viralminda (also called Viramainter) and Cheraman Perumal, and of the twelve Alwars, Kulasekhara belonged to Kerala. We shall discuss briefly the life and work of these Kerala savants in the propagation of the Bhakti cult which provided the real impetus to the temple-building activity in Kerala.

Kulasekhara Alwar, a leading figure in the history of the Vaishnava movement in the South, was a profound scholar in Sanskrit and Tamil. He came under the influence of Nammalwar and sang several devotional songs praising Vishnu in the form of Rama and Krishna.

His main literary works are *Mukundamala* in Sanskrit and *Perumal Tirumozhi* in Tamil. He revered the servants or devotees of Vishnu as gods themselves and wrote in his *Perumal Tirumozhi :* “Upon my brow I will bear with pride the mud that stains their holy feet.” His teachings and writings contributed in no small measure to the development of Vaishnavism in Kerala.

Growth of Saivism and Vaishnavism

Cheraman Perumal Nayanar, one of the two Nayanars from Kerala, as stated above, has been identified with Rajasekhara Varman (820-844 A.D.), the second of the kings who ruled over the Kulasekhara empire. He spent his boyhood at the famous Siva shrine at Tiruvanchikulam, near Kodungallur, worshiping the Lord. He went on pilgrimage to all important Saivite shrines in South India in the company of his life-long friend and companion, Sundaramurthi Nayanar of Tiruvarur. The two saints are also believed to have breathed their last at Tiruvanchikulam where their images may still be seen in the Siva temple.

Cheraman Perumal's songs form part of the orthodox Saiva canon in the *Thevaram,* while his *Tirukkailayajnanaula* in praise of Vadakkunnathan of Trichur or Southern Kailas became the model for a new style of poetic composition in Tamil.

Viralminda Nayanar was born at Chengannur. He was a Vellala, and as such a *sudra* by caste. He was a contemporary of Cheraman Perumal Nayanar, and a close associate of Sundaramurthi Nayanar. In his old age he left his native place for Chidambaram. He held the devotees of Siva as being more worthy than Siva himself. He once compelled Sundaramurthi who was rushing towards the sanctum to show proper respect to the *Sivanatiyar Tirukkuttam,* saying that wherever the *Atiyar* or devotees were assembled there Siva also was present.

The work of the Nayanars and Alwars led to the establishment of several Saiva and Vaishnava shrines all over Kerala. The Tiruvanchikulam temple associated with Cheraman Perumal and Sundaramurthi, and Trivandrum and other Vaishnava shrines praised by Alwars attracted numerous pilgrims from other parts of India.

Kali or Durga, neglected by the Nayanars and the Alwars, began to be worshipped as Sakti in the *Tantras*, which claimed to lead the votary to salvation by a shortcut. In course of time the *Tantric* mode of worship was adopted by some of the devotees of Siva and Vishnu, who called themselves Virasaivas and Viravaishnavas respectively.

However, gradually all these religious sects began to succumb to fanaticism. The followers of Siva and Vishnu began to quarrel for precedence and superiority. The *Tantric* worship became midnight orgy with women and liquor. Some of the sects took to murder and cannibalism. During the Kannaki festival a goldsmith was even publicly slaughtered at Tiruvottiyur.

Advent of Sankara

When religion was thus becoming tainted with vice and crime Sankaracharya (788-820), the great Advaita philosopher was born at Kaladi, an obscure village in central Kerala. He could not bear the sight of people quarrelling in the name of God and indulging in immorality and bloodshed to propitiate Him. Declining the gold and position offered by King Rajasekhara of Kodungallur, this Nambudiri Brahmin left Kerala in his youth and undertook a pilgrimage of all important centres of Hinduism in the country (See Kaladi - The Birth Place of Adi Sankara, Chapter 11 for story of the Saint.)

He propounded the philosophy of Advaita or One without a second and convinced the learned everywhere, who acknowledged the superiority of this system based on the teachings of the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*. According to this philosophy there is nothing real in this world except the One Supreme God, i.e. the Brahman.

Sankara borrowed some of the popular features of Buddhist faith and reformed Hindu religion on new and attractive lines. He converted his rivals not by miracles and ordeals, as Appar and Sambandhar did, but through argument. In fact, Sankara may claim to have carried the Buddha's reasoning to its logical conclusion. He also accepted the Buddhist ideal of monasticism and set up a strong Brahminical institution by establishing *maths* in different corners of India in an effort to consolidate the moral and spiritual values and traditions of Hinduism.

Sankara's Advaita reconciled popular Hinduism with the philosophy of the Upanishads. By offering worship to Siva, Vishnu and other gods of the Hindu pantheon without any difference, Sankara condemned the narrow sectarianism of his contemporaries, and re-affirmed the truth of the Vedic mantra, *"Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti* -, the reality is one, the sages call it variously."

A popular form of worship which Sankara, established is *Shanmata* - the worship of Surya, Ganapati, Kumara or Subrahmanya, Siva, Vishnu and Devi. His *stotras* or *slokas* in praise of the various deities have given the learned as well as the illiterate a form of prayer at once simple, consoling and exhilarating.

Rich Heritage of Temples

Small wonder Hindu religious activity received a great impetus under Sankaracharya and before long became a predominant religion in Kerala. “And the fervorous imagination of passionate saints, poets and people” as Mulk Raj Anand put it, “created a rich heritage of unique temples, built like domestic houses, with ample courtyards and tiled conical roofs.”

“The accompanying ritualistic arts of dance-drama, such as *Kathakali, Kutiyattam, Mohini attam,* and the folk styles, like *Theyyam* and *Ottan Thullal,* were rehearsed generation after generation. The walls of the shrines were painted in large-scale adumbrations of the legends of the gods, in vivid colours to offset the greens of the earth.

“The lovely soft woods were carved into sculptural decorations to highlight the corners of the shrines. The rare sandstone was hewn into images. In fact, the illusory world of Sankara’s conception was incarnated into Reality itself”.

According to the Archaeological Survey of India, the temple-architecture in Kerala had its beginning in the early part of the ninth century in the age of Kulasekharas. This is attributed to the political revival of the Cheras which was accompanied by a religious upheaval giving birth to temples built more or less in permanent material. The earlier Cheras too are said to have extended their patronage to the worship of Vishnu, Skanda or Subrahmanya and Kottavai or Durga indicating the existence of shrines in their times though there is no evidence as to their structural forms. Before the rise of structural temples in different parts of Kerala there were only cave temples and rock-cut caves such as those seen at Vizhinam, Kottakkal and Kaviyur.

Indeed the Chera and Kulasekhara dynasties developed an architectural tradition that belongs to Kerala alone. It consists of the sloping roofs, sometimes reduplicated, and the profuse use of wood in superstructures that have lent a distinct individuality to the temples of Kerala. In fact Kerala temples must be credited with the full development of wooden art in Asia as witnessed in its roof struts, gables, lintels, cornices, screens and ceilings.

The use of the sloping roof on wooden frames which was introduced primarily to counteract heavy rain, also lend superficial similarity with the

architectural traditions of the Himalayan region, China and Far Eastern countries.

Further, Kerala temples are rarely higher than the coconut palms around them. Their style of architecture, though complicated, is never remarkable for design, elegance or magnificence of dimensions; it consists of a series of low buildings, encompassed by a strong wall; they are surrounded with groves and tanks for the refreshment and devotion of Brahmins; their site is always well chosen on the bank of a stream, or verge of a lake, embossed in the exuberant foliage of majestic trees; nothing can be more beautifully picturesque than their situation.

Classic Temple

A classic temple in Kerala called *ambalam* or *kshetram* or sometimes *tali* has the *srikoil* or central shrine as its heart. The *srikoil* plan may be round, square, rectangular, oval or apsidal (semicircular) and the temple normally faces east, though some face west and a few south. The structure from *adhisthana* (basement) to *stupi* (finial, the uppermost member of the temple) is termed the *vimana*. Some structures are small and single-storyed, called *alpa-vimana* or *ekatala-vimana*, while others are two-storeyed or *dvitala*. Some even reach heights of many roofs. However, the upper levels of the *srikoil* are not functional; their role is to give the building an imposing appearance.

With the *srikoil* forming the nucleus, the other components like the open *pradakshina patha,* the cloistered *nalambalam,* the *vilakkumatam* affixed with a galaxy of lamps, paved outer *pradakshina vari* and *prakara* or *prakaras* are aligned in orderly succession centering the main shrine or shrines. Further, whatever the plan of the *srikoil,* i.e. square or circular, etc., the arrangements of other components follow invariably a concentric rectangular alignment. The temple-well which supplies water for bathing the deity and for preparing food is situated generally in the north-east corner. The kitchen or *madapalli* is also provided in one portion of the *nalambalam.*

As a general rule, the *srikoil* is fronted by a square *namaskara mandapa* with a pyramidal roof. In some temples there is another pillared structure, the *balikkal mandapa,* in front of the *valiambalam,* a wing of the *nalambalam,* providing the main entrance to the temple proper.

Facing the *balikkal mandapa,* which enshrines the main *balipitha* is the *dwajastambha* or flag staff that stands towering over the temple environs. There may be a *deepastambha* or gallery of lamps also, one or more in number, in front of the *balikkal mandapa.* Close by, in bigger complexes, we find a large edifice, the *kuttambalam* meant for *kuttu* or *Kutiyattam.*

Surrounding the inner structure is the paved processional path. Then there is the outer *prakara* (enclosure wall) enclosing all these structures which is pierced at the entrance and sometimes on all four sides by gopuras with multiple roofs covered with tiles though they are not tall or imposing like

those of Dravidian shrines. The outer boundary wall is, as Ronald Bernier so beautifully put it, “to separate sacred ground from the mundane world outside.” There is also the temple-tank as part of the structure which devotees can use and directly enter the temple after a bath.

Smaller shrines dedicated to Sasta, Ganesha, etc., are also found in almost all the temples. But more prominently, the sacred trees and snake-stones also survive inside the temple precincts as relics of early animistic devotion.

Speciality of Kerala Temples

In sum, what is special about Kerala temples which have started attracting world attention for the unique architectural style and forms, which many in India are not even aware of? Writes Ronald Bernier:

“Firstly, Kerala temples emphasize horizontal movement as symbolic of the path toward truth. The temple is not a mountain, although it is built around an axis. It is activated by its enshrined ‘engine’, a holy power in the form of a sculpture or symbol from which energy and goodness radiate. Mighty as it is, a figural image at the centre of the womb may smile in benevolent, friendly acceptance. Perhaps Kerala’s is the most house like of all the divine dwellings in India. Its materials are natural and clearly earth-derived. The monument touches the masses in terms of earthly experience rather than of the worldly grandeur and pomp. At the same time, there is room for preciousness (why shouldn’t Garuda be made of gold?) since the temple is after all a heavenly abode.

“It is not for its precious parts that Kerala temple design is best to be remembered, but for its special accomplishments primarily in the use of wood. Wooden art throughout the subcontinent has suffered with the ravages of time, from changing tastes and fashion, and with the results of deforestation.....Only in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal are major efforts being made to restore and conserve wooden architecture. In Kerala, the medieval environment of temples in wood, stone, and tile is still alive, as in Nepal, and this situation is important to the history of art in India.

“It has already been remarked that the geometric impact of Kerala temple structures, particularly their roofs, is unique. Other buildings in India make strongly geometrical visual statements - Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya, Lad Khan at Aihole, the tower of Rajarajeshwara at Tanjore - but nowhere else is the structure so straightforward and abbreviated as in Kerala. It is as if the temple in Kerala has been distilled to its purest ingredients.

“And so the temples of Kerala, gently harmonizing with lushly forested settings, earthy in materials and scale, seem to grow naturally from the environment. A family of Hindu gods has been adopted into their new and gentle world, and the family has grown and matured into numerous new personalities. Similarly Kerala’s own artistic identity has developed and

modified through thousands of years; it is not compromised but enriched by contact with the traditions of the subcontinent as a whole. Kerala remains apart yet integrated, both borrower and creator. It is a place unlike any other home of great living monuments."

The rise of temples also saw the development of culture in all its aspects. The temple became the nerve-centre of all cultural activities. Temple festivals were instituted with a view to making the Hindu religion more attractive. Festivals also gave an opportunity to people for the expression of their deepest spiritual cravings.

Mamamkam Festival

Of the temple festivals, two ancient ones deserve special mention for their historical importance, though they are extinct now. These are the *Mahamagha* festival conducted at Tirunavay on the banks of the Bharatapuzha near Tirur and the Onam festival of Trikkakara, near Ernakulam. Tirunavay was once famous for the pan-Kerala assembly called Mamamkam.

In the ancient days the annual festival of Tirunavay - the temple here is dedicated to Mahavishnu - was celebrated for one month, from the Puyam or eighth asterism in the solar month Makaram (January-February) to the Makam or tenth asterism in the following month of Kumbha (February-March). Once in twelve years the festival is known as Mahamagha or Mamamkam which was held very sacred because of the *arattu* or immersion of the Lord's image in the river, Bharatapuzha on the Makam day. It was believed that the waters of the holy Ganges flew into the river on this occasion and hence people from the most distant parts of Kerala used to come to Tirunavay for the festival.

It is not known when this festival was instituted. It was celebrated at first by the Cheraman rulers of Kodungallur. After their disappearance the Vallatri took their place as its *Rakshapurusha* or protector. The Vallatri was ousted in the 14th century by the Zamorin with a view to securing for himself the time-honoured privilege of presiding over Mamamkam.

The last Mamamkam was celebrated in 1766. The festival was to Kerala what the Olympian and Pythian festivals had been to ancient Greece.

Onam Festival

The Trikkakara temple dedicated to Vamana, the fifth incarnation of Vishnu, was founded and renovated in 604 A.D. The Edapalli (a small kingdom in the vicinity of Cochin) chiefs were its priests. On account of their *sambandham*, or marriage alliance with the princesses of Perumpadappu Swarupam or Cochin Royal House, the annual Onam festival in the month of Chingom (August-September) became important for these royal families. But in the 15th century the relations between these two families were strained as a result of which the Perumpadappu chiefs allied themselves with the Zamorin.

Thereafter the festival became important for the Zamorin's family. In course of time the temple got endowments from every part of Kerala. In ancient Kerala it was the duty of the temple tenants, to whatsoever religion or caste they might belong, to attend its annual festival. Those living far away celebrated the festival in their own homes if they could not be present at Trikkakara. Thus the Trikkakara festival became the national Onam festival. Onam is still celebrated as the national festival of Kerala but not in the manner described above.

The annual temple festival or *utsavam* in Kerala temples are, as mentioned earlier, important events and generally lasts as long as ten days or even more - at Chengannur Bhagawati temple it lasts even 28 days. The hoisting of the temple flag usually marks the beginning of the celebrations. The *arattu* or the ceremonial bathing of the deity marks the culmination. The real emphasis, however, during the festival is on rituals and purificatory rites to increase the *chaitanya* or power of the deity. In fact, *utsavams* consist of two classes of functions - the *Akathepaditharam* or the ritual side and *Purathepaditharam* or the ceremonial side for amusement which consists of elephant procession, music, dance, fireworks etc.

Temples and Politics

Temples have played an important part not only in the religious life of Kerala but also in its political history. Writes K.V. Krishna Ayyar in his *A Short History of Kerala :* "There might be nothing unique in the Chera kings propitiating their tutelar deity, Kottavai, before they started on their warlike expeditions. Marthanda Varma, again, might not be doing anything peculiar when he got his sword consecrated at the temple of Adikesava at Tiruvattur before he attacked the Dutch in 1741. But the worship offered by the Zamorin not only to his guardian deity but also to the tutelary deity of the enemy was original, a new device in statecraft, seducing not only the enemy's allies but also his deity."

Devotion prompted the chiefs of Kerala not only to build temples but also serve the Lord by associating themselves with the management of temples of others as *purakoyma* or *kovil adhikari.* The chiefs of Perumpadappu (of Cochin) were once the *purakoyma* of the Vaikom temple in Travancore. Whatever the difficulties, seldom did a chief decline to accept the offer of a *purakoyma.* Ambition also had led the rulers to become controlling authorities of famous temples as we have seen in the case of Tirunavay in the rulers vying with one another to secure the right to preside over the ceremonies.

A large number of temples in Kerala were sovereign states with a well-defined territory called *sanketan* and well-defined organs of government. The area under the temples ranged from a few acres to hundreds of square miles as in the case of the Padmanabhaswami temple at Trivandrum. The deity was the head in such temple states. Everything was done in the name of the Lord or of His auspicious asterism. The Lord had his own human representative in the *yogathirippad* and He kept himself informed of the day-to-day affairs of His state, so to speak, by having the *Tirthola* or holy palm-leaf showing the daily income and expenditure, read out in His presence before the temple was closed at night.

The festival of the temple served as an annual review of the administration. Complaints were invited at the beginning and at the close of the festival and the grievances, if any, had to be redressed before proceeding further. The Peruvanam festival had to be suspended for a year because one of the

people assembled came forward saying that he could not get a suitable bridegroom for his daughter; and the festival was celebrated only after a bridegroom was found and the girl married. The *arattu* procession at Guruvayur stops even now at a certain spot and does not move forward till a descendant of the temple servant once murdered here comes forward and says, “we have no grievance.”

Similarly, during the annual festival, normal activities like thatching of roof, hulling of rice, etc, were forbidden to enable everyone to take part in the rejoicings. Those who had gone out of the village had to come back and if they did not return they were deemed dead and their obsequies performed.

Apart from promoting learning, culture and devotion as other temples, temple states had been of great importance in Kerala. Their administration was more enlightened and humane. Corruption was unknown. Anyone indulging in unscrupulous activities was severely punished. These temples also served as sanctuaries where the oppressed and the vanquished could take refuge. The Rani of Attingal saved herself in 1730 from the Raja of Kayamkulam by resorting to the sanctuary of Netumpuram Tali.

Revival of Bhakti Movement

We have seen how the wave of religious devotion that swept over the land in the 9th century under the leadership of the Nayanars and the Alwars gave birth to temples. There was a revival of the Bhakti movement during the Portuguese period (A.D. 1498-1663) which was one of political violence, social decadence and economic depression. The arrival of the Portuguese put an end to the advance of the Zamorin and prevented the unification of Kerala under him. Instead, the local chiefs quarrelled amongst themselves and intrigued with foreign powers to ruin one another.

Economically, the Muslims were ousted from the profitable sea trade in ginger, pepper and other spices with Arabia and they had to contend with petty coastal trade in coconuts and cloth. Thus began a drain to Europe resulting in progressive impoverishment of Kerala.

The social atmosphere was also poisoned by the Portuguese. Their policy so utterly different from the Kerala *Maryada* of 'Live and let live', substituted hatred and suspicion for love and trust, and selfishness and opportunism for co-operation and idealism. They indulged in atrocities such as large-scale killing of civilian population and destruction of temples and mosques. All this created a feeling of revulsion among people and they craved for a message of hope and cheer.

Fortunately for them new exponents of Bhakti cult emerged on the scene. The foremost among them was Tunchat Ezhuthachan, the father of Malayalam literature, whose devotional works such as *Adhyatma Ramayanam, Mahabharatam, Harinamakirtanam,* etc., preached to the common people the doctrine of selfless devotion and surrender to God in the form of Vishnu. As K.V. Krishna Ayyar puts it : "The age of Love and Romance came to an end with the arrival of the Portuguese and with Tunchat Ramanuja Ezhuthachan who lived in the 16th century began the age of devotion in Malayalam literature."

Poet-Saints

The 16th century also produced two other poet-saints who made their valuable contribution to the growth of the Bhakti cult. They were Meppathur Narayana Bhattatiri (1559-1625) and Puntanam Nambudiri (1547-1640). Meppathur wrote his famous *Narayaniyam* sitting on the *mandapa* in front of Lord Krishna of Guruvayur and praying to Him to cure him of his rheumatism. And cured he was on the day he finished the hundredth and last *dasaka* on December 7, 1586.

The *Narayaniyam* consisting of 1036 stanzas is a summary of the *Bhagavata* on the one hand and a prayer to the Lord on the other to bless the devotee with *Ayur-arogya-saukhyam* or long life, health and happiness. It embodies the quintessence of the message of Bhakti and has been extremely popular with devotees.

Puntanam Nambudiri was also a great devotee of Lord Krishna of Guruvayur. He lost his infant son born after years of supplication to Guruvayurappan. Naturally he became distraught and came to Guruvayur determined to recover his lost child by prayer. Gradually, however, little Krishna took the place of the deceased little one in his heart and wisdom dawned upon him. “With little Krishna dancing in our hearts”, asked he, “why need we little ones of our own ?”

Thereafter, he spent the remaining fifty-four years of his life in devotion to the Lord of Guruvayur and exhorted people to read the *Bhagavata* and repeat the Lord’s name as the only way to salvation. The Bhakti cult found expression in his Malayalam works, *Jnanappana* or song of Wisdom, *Srikrishnakarnamritam* and *Santanagopalam.*

Not only saints, some of the local Rajas also played a prominent role in the promotion of the Bhakti cult. The most prominent of these was Prince (afterwards Zamorin) Manavedan (1595-1658), a fervent devotee of the Lord of Guruvayur Who is said to have vouchsafed a vision of Himself as a little boy playing in the temple premises. It was he who wrote the *Krishnagita* or *Krishnattam* which describes in eight cantos the story of Krishna after the model of the twelfth century Bengali poet - saint Jayadeva’s *Gitagovinda. Krishnattam,* literally, the dance of Krishna, is regularly staged at Guruvayur temple.

Then there was Vilwamangalam II who also figures prominently in the tradition connected with not only the Guruvayur temple but almost every temple in Kerala. He was such an ardent devotee of Krishna that he could always see Him in his mystic trance. It was he who inspired Prince Manavedan to write the *Krishnagita* and another King, Devanarayan, the ruler of Champakasseri and an exponent of the Bhakti cult, to consecrate another famous temple of Sri Krishna in Kerala, i.e. at Ambalapuzha in South Kerala. (See chapter 6)

Thus Guruvayur gained increasing importance as a centre of the Krishna cult during the Portuguese period.

Social Reforms

The temples of Kerala also played an important part in the movement for eradication of untouchability which started with the famous Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924-25. Even Mahatma Gandhi was associated with this event and the result was the opening of the temple approach roads to all Hindus, which were otherwise closed to Harijans. Then there was a referendum regarding the opening of Guruvayur temple to all Hindus, in which 70 per cent of the voters showed approval.

Subsequently on November 12, 1936, the Sri Chitra Balarama Varma, Maharaja of Travancore, issued the Temple Entry Proclamation. Within a decade Cochin and Malabar followed suit. Thus, "Kerala was at the forefront of the social and religious reforms that were to be institutionalized throughout India with independence in 1947."

Mention must be made here of two saints of the period, who were more pragmatic. They were Chattampi Swamikal (1854-1924) and Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928) who dedicated themselves to their community - Nair and Ezhava respectively - instead of seeking salvation only for their individual selves by withdrawing from the world.

It was probably Kunchan Nambiar who first drew pointed attention to the evils that were creeping into the Nair society. And it was left to Chattampi Swamikal to tackle them. He worked in close co-operation with Sri Narayana Guru in the common cause of Hindu social and religious regeneration. He called upon his own fellow castemen to raise themselves and become an example to other communities.

Sri Narayana Guru's reforms were more elaborate. He realized that temples were necessary for the average man, and as the lzhavas and Thiyyas were not admitted to the temples of higher castes, he himself consecrated shrines in several parts of Kerala for the worship of lzhavas and permitted entry into them for Pulayas and other low castes, considered inferior to the lzhavas on the social scale. He advocated intermarriages between the various castes as the best means of evolving a casteless society. In 1904 he founded the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham to spread his gospel of "One Caste, One religion and One God."

Traditionally Kerala is associated with the charming myth of Parasurama, the avatar of Vishnu, who performed penances to atone for his sin of having killed his mother and the Great God rewarded the devotee for his austerities by reclaiming Kerala from the depths of the sea. According to legend, it was Parasurama who brought Brahmins to Kerala from the Aryan north and gave them land.

Geographically, however, the strip of 579 km. long land of Kerala appears to have been formed by the annual silt brought by the rivers from the Western Ghats and the association of Parasurama may be a racial memory of the reclamation of the land from the sea. All the same several of the temples in Kerala are associated with the legendary Parasurama.

Whatever the popular belief, “Kerala” to quote Sarkar “is a land of temples as it is a land of hills, back-waters and spices.” Behind its (temple’s) simple veil is hidden a form rich in vision and design.

The temples of Kerala do not inspire awe as their counterparts in neighbouring states. They seem like the abodes of gods and of goddesses you have long known and who are as much a part of your life as humans. Also the deities are, whether or not you are an *astika,* part of the very air you breathe. They beckon to you like a loving mother or father and you soon realise you cannot do without them.

2. THE TEMPLE OF SRI PADMANABHA – WITNESS TO A BYGONE ERA

In our younger days - and that was some sixty years ago - poor Brahmins who could not subsist themselves went to Trivandrum, the capital of the princely state of Travancore. Children who became orphans, women who became widows and destitute, all resorted to the temple of Lord Padmanabha, where thousands of Brahmins received two free meals a day.

Indeed, thanks to the munificence of then Maharajas of Travancore, dozens of *uttupuras,* free feeding houses for Brahmins, were opened throughout the state. But the foremost among them was in the Padmanabhaswami temple which enabled many Brahmins to live free when they were getting an education or conducting a petty trade.

There are many who have prospered in life and come to occupy high positions in many walks of life after feeding themselves in *uttupuras* and reading by street lights. However, the system of free feeding gave rise to a class of Brahmins who were idlers and parasites.

The Tamil brahmins were called "back-tufted intruders" since most of them immigrated from neighbouring Tamil districts. The humorous Malayalam poet, Kunchan Nambiar, who satirized most communities in Kerala singled them out for 'a more vigorous and unrelieved trouncing' than the rest. Of their gastronomical displays in the free feeding houses, he wrote:

> *He pulverizes two whole baskets of pappadams*
> *and mixes it well with two whole baskets of bananas*
> *and kneads it to paste like the country cement*
> *eats all he can*
> *leaves all he can't*
> *The way he gorges*
> *Will make any one's gorge rise*

Then there is the sexennial *murajapam* ceremony which is a major public appearance of the Malayali Brahmins - Nambudiris - who came to Trivandrum from all parts of Kerala to chant prayers for the state and be feasted for 56 days. There is a history behind it and the provision of free feeding houses for Tamil Brahmins.

Marthanda Varma, a great warrior and statesman, became ruler of Travancore in 1729 A.D. He launched a campaign of territorial expansion by waging war against recalcitrant and petulant local chiefs. He annexed territory after territory, liquidating even the most powerful, *"ettuveettil pillamars"* and *"madampimars"* and, by 1750, the state extended from a tiny area near Nagercoil in the south to the backwaters of Cochin in the north.

King becomes servant of Lord

The same year, in atonement of the 'Sins of war', he made over all his rights and possessions, the sceptre and the orb, the *pada* and the *praja* (army and people) to Lord Padmanabha. In token of abject surrender he symbolically placed the royal sword on the steps of the sanctum sanctorum and, receiving it back, he returned to the palace. Thereafter, he ruled the state as 'Padmanabha dasa' or servant of Lord Padmanabha and ordained that his successors also would do likewise.

It is to retain the goodwill of numerous Tamil Brahmins who were brought to *sirkar* service to help him in furthering the consolidation of his kingdom that Marthanda Varma opened dozens of *uttupuras.* At the same time he also made attempts to conciliate the Malayali Brahmins - Nambudiris and Pottis - who had been roughly handled during the course of the consolidation.

The six-yearly *murajapam* (literally, recitation of the vedas), a political "At home" to the disaffected Nambudiris, the original landowners of Kerala, was started in this context. The ceremony has a religious as well as political aspect. The religious side was the expiation of sins and for the welfare of the kingdom, by propitiating the deities, especially, Sri Padmanabha. The prayers were indeed on a large-scale. The Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Sama Veda were recited eight times over and the whole ceremonial took eight weeks.

The political side meant keeping the Nambudiris as also the barons and the landlords of the subdued kingdoms in good humour. The festival turned out to be a veritable extravaganza. Hundreds of Brahmins were given *'Sadya'* or feast on such a grand style which could do proud to any king. The plantain leaves in which food was served were four to five feet long and the items served a score and half and as many helpings as a man could take. And above all the Brahmins were lavished with gifts.

Festival of lights

The 56-day *murajapam* culminated in *Laksha deepam* - the festival of a hundred-thousand lights - on the auspicious day of Makara Sankranti (mid-January). There are two half-yearly "Bhadradeepam" ceremonies and when twelve such had been performed, a *murajapam* and *Lakshadeepam* are conducted.

The entire gopuram and other parts of the temple lit up in myriad lamps presented a spectacular sight. Time was when all the hundred-thousand were oil lamps which surged with life and weaved endless patterns in the waters of the temple tank - Padmathirtha. But today, thanks to the straitened circumstances, oil lamps are substituted by the lifeless multicoloured electric bulbs. But, all the same, the old charm is there - the gaiety, the fun, the festive colours and the jostling crowds.

Still, old-timers who know the past glory of Travancore say the present-day *murajapams* are not even a shadow of the very first one held in 1750 or the last full-scale one held in 1960.

While *murajapam* is still held every six years, *uttupuras* have become a thing of the past. The giant bellmetal cauldrons, which require elephants to keep them in position over the 5 to 6 feet high ovens are still seen in the temple courtyard - several of them, we are told, have been sold. What remains are relics of a bygone era. They remind the visitors of the pomp and grandeur in which the rituals, ceremonies and festivals were once conducted.

Today, though the Maharajas are no longer the rulers, the temple continues to be owned by the erstwhile princely family. Due to the changed circumstances, drastic economy in expenditure and changes in external paraphernalia and trappings and in the hereditary duties and functions of temple staff had to be effected. Care is, however, taken to ensure that the daily rites, rituals and festivals are not affected - these are still conducted strictly according to the *agamas* and *shastras.*

Members of the princely family have been traditionally devotees of the Lord Padmanabha. Umayamma Rani, the grandmother of Marthanda Varma during her reign (1677-84) saw to it that the daily rites and festivals of the

temple were properly conducted. While she stayed at the capital she would go every day to the shrine to make her obeisance and never took her food before the noonday worship. And it is on record that once she had to forgo it altogether as, for some reasons, the noonday worship could not be performed. The tradition continues even today.

A Landmark

Standing on an elevated part of the town and with its lofty eastern gopuram rising seven storeys high with a curious pagoda effect at its peak, the Padmanabhaswami temple is the main landmark of Trivandrum. Trivandrum itself derives its name from Tiru-Ananta-puram, which means the place of the sacred serpent, Ananta or Adisesha on which the Lord Padmanabha reclines.

It is architecturally the most notable of temples in Kerala with both the indigenous style and the features of Dravidian architecture harmoniously blended. No one knows when this temple was built - one legend traces it back to 3000 B.C. An engraved inscription in Sanskrit and Malayalam characters on the base of the *mandapa* inside reveals that the temple was reconstructed from the *Vimana* down and the work started in 1729 A.D. Indeed, most of what is seen today within the temple walls is attributed to Marthanda Varma, the maker of modern Travancore, referred to above, which entitles him to the first place among the royal devout.

Even before he became King in 1729, he had made plans for reconstructing the temple. When he came to the throne he put these works under way personally supervising much of it. Notable among these works were the reconstruction of the sanctum sanctorum and the replacement of the old, recumbent wooden idol of Sri Padmanabha with a new one, fashioned out of 1200 ‘shalagrams’ which were specially brought down for the purpose and moulded into shape with a particular kind of mortar made of *Kadusarkara,* a compound of lime and granite covered with the paste of molasses and mustard.

The *darshan* of the deity is through three doors in a row - the face on the southern side, the sacred feet on the northern side and the nabhi (navel) in the middle from which appears Brahma. It is the majestic Narayana whom *Bhagavata* describes as being absorbed in the *yoganidra,* reclining on the great serpent Adishesha, and one who creates all the three worlds.

The *ottakkal* (single-stone slab) *mandapam* in front of the idol was rebuilt with a single slab of granite, two and half feet thick and twenty feet square. The eastern gopuram, for which the foundation had been laid in 1566, was also rebuilt upto the fifth storey. (The work was completed and it was raised

to its present height and form much later, some time between 1758 and 1798 when the state was ruled by Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma.)

A colossal feat

Some of the constructional details of the temple stagger the imagination. The *Sreebalipura,* the magnificent rectangular corridor built of stone surrounding the main shrines, took 4,000 masons, 6,000 labourers, 100 elephants and seven months to complete the work. And the temple flagstaff, built of special teak, later encased in gold, came from a site 48 km. away without ever touching the ground - a colossal feat performed by elephants.

The Travancore State Manual has a detailed description of the temple which is summarised below:

“This temple stands on an elevated part of the town. The area covered by its enclosures is 570 feet x 510 feet or 25,700 sq. feet or about 7 acres. It faces east and is surrounded by massive fort walls. A handsome flight of stone-steps on the eastern side shows the gentle eminence of the temple site, the front portion of which is covered by a huge *gopura* or tower pyramidal in shape and built of granite and brick on the model of the lofty *gopuras* of the east coast temples. This tower is about 100 feet in height and has storeys with window light-openings in the centre of each of them.

“The stone basement of the tower is covered with elaborate sculptures, and the masonry above with ornamental work of Puranic figures, the top having seven gold steeples or turrets. Underneath the *gopura* is the main gateway leading to the principal temple, well protected by a number of massive doors and guarded by sentries. Between the gateway and the inner shrine there is a fine broad open corridor in the form of an oblong supported by 324 pillars and covered with terraced roof, the walk of God’s procession. On one side, it is 450 feet long and on the other side 350 feet. It is 25 feet broad.

“The two rows of granite pillars and the stone ceiling above are decorated with fine sculptures. Every pillar has the figure of a Nayar girl bearing a lamp in the palm of her hands joined together and raised above her waist. The top of each pillar is surmounted by the head of a unicorn in the mouth of which is a loose ball of stone.”

The mandapa was also used for feeding a large number of Brahmins every day. At the four points of this oblong corridor, but not connected with it,

stand four stone platforms, from which people witness the God’s procession during the important festivals in the temple.

Impressive Stone Sculptures

"They are used on ordinary days for the reading of the Puranas or the recital of Puranic stories on special occasions by a class of people called *chakkiars.* On the south of the southern part of the corridor is a house dedicated to the performance of the Chief State ceremonies. North of the oblong are the cooking apartments of the feeding house attached to the temple.

"Beyond this magnificent corridor or covered walk is the flagstaff of gold which is about 80 feet in height and circular in shape, holding at the top Garuda, the God's favourite riding bird. South of this flagpost and connected with the corridor is the Kulasekhara *mandapa,* containing most impressive stone sculptures of the early eighteenth century.

"Between the flagstaff and the inner shrine is the space containing the altar. The inner shrine is rectangular in shape and consists of two storeys and is ornamented with gables, an essential characteristic of the Kerala style of temple architecture. Outside the inner shrine, but within the enclosures, there are smaller shrines dedicated to Krishna, Kshetrapala, Sasta, Nara-simha, Vyasa, Siva, Ganesha, Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and others.

"The outer walls of the central shrine are covered with mural paintings recently renovated depicting various scenes from the Puranas. The central shrine, with the halls and *mandapas* inside, are enclosed by a rectangular structure on the outside of which columns of lamps of brass *(vilakkumatam)* are fixed."

The temple has preserved some of the best traditions of stone sculpture in Kerala and is the receptacle of some of the finest examples of the sculptor's art of the eighteenth century. The Kulasekhara *mandapa* in particular is a storehouse of some of the best pieces of sculpture and contains representations of various deities, especially of Vishnu and Siva. The figure of Vishnu is a fine example of statuary art. It is in a sitting posture with Lakshmi on the left.

The God holds in his hands the Shanka (Conch) and Chakra (wheel) and his other emblems. A towering canopy made of a tree with numerous

intertwined branches covered with flowers and fruits provide the background.

Another interesting seated image is that of Vighneswara (Ganesha) with his portly belly and stout diminutive limbs. On his sides stand three Brahmin priests performing puja, which are masterpieces of realistic art.

Scenes from Puranas

Various other Puranic scenes and figures are also depicted with scrupulous finish : Markandeya embracing Siva, Krishna playing on the flute with the gopis dancing, the incarnation of Vishnu as Vamana (dwarf), Kaliyamardhana (Krishna trampling on the serpent, Kaliya), various scenes from the Ramayana such as the presentation of Rama and Lakshmana to Vishwamitra, the departure of Rama with his brother and wife to the forest, the abduction of Siva, the fight with Bali, Hanuman setting Lanka on fire and the fight with Ravana. The story of the *Bhagavata* is also depicted in small reliefs. Then there are trees, bushes, animals and birds such as parrots, squirrels and monkeys, all carved with remarkable life and grace.

From time immemorial, the temple is considered one of the important Vaishnavite centres of pilgrimage. In Padma Purana there is reference to the temple of Anantasayanam, where the Lord Vishnu is having his *yoganidra* i.e.where he is lying on the serpent Ananta. It is also mentioned with Mathura, Venkatadri etc. as one of the well-known Vishnu tirthas.

In the Skandapurana, Setu Mahatmya, Brahmakhanda Chap. 52, verses 102 to 105, some of the most important places of pilgrimages are indicated, which include Padmanabha. These sacred places are Kumbhakonam, Rameshwaram, Gokarna (48 km. south of Goa), Naimisha forest (Nimsar, 72 km from Lucknow), Ayodhya, Dandaka (starting from Bhopal and extending upto the river Godavari), Virupaksha (at Hampi), Venkata (Tirupati), Saligram (at the source of river Gandaka), Prayaga, Kanchi, Dwarka, Mathura (both Mathura in the North and Madurai in the South), Padmanabha (Anantasayanam at Trivandrum), Kasi, the abode of Lord Visweshwara, rivers, oceans and Bhaskara kshetra i.e. Konarak.

There is also mention in the Bhagavata purana (canto 10 chapter 79) that Balarama visited “Syanandoorapuram” in the course of his pilgrimage and the belief is that this refers to the shrine of Anantasayanam at Trivandrum. Similarly in the Brahmanda purana also there is reference to “Syanandoorapura.” The compositions of Nammalwar, the great Viashnavite saint, in praise of Mahavishnu, also prove beyond doubt that this temple existed in the fifth century of this era.

Great antiquity

The story of the temple as handed down through the centuries in the form of legends also indicate that it is one of great antiquity. Anantasayana Mahatmya as also some old palm-leaf records of the temple contain one such legend. According to this, the temple is said to have been set up by a Tulu Brahmin hermit named Divakara Muni on the 950th day of Kaliyuga.

Divakara Muni, a great devotee of Vishnu, was doing penance and tapas in 'Aatharta' desa. One day Mahavishnu appeared before him in the form of a beautiful child. The sanyasi was taken up with the charms of the divine child and requested him to stay with him. The child agreed but on one condition that the sage would never get upset with him. The hermit agreed and tolerated all the childish pranks of the little boy.

But one day, while Divakara Muni was in meditation the child took the 'salagram' which he was worshipping and put it into his mouth and made such a nuisance of himself that the Muni chastised him. The child immediately ran away and disappeared saying, "If you wish to see me again you will find me in Anantankadu, the forest of Ananta."

The sage was inconsolable and followed the child for several days without food or rest. Finally, he reached a wooded area near the sea coast and saw the child vanishing into a huge *ilappa* tree. Immediately, the tree fell to the ground assuming the shape of a recumbent Mahavishnu. The divine form was nearly 13 km. long, having his head at Tiruvallam (about 5 km. distant from the present fort) and its feet at Trippapur (8 km. away in the opposite direction).

Majestic Form

Overawed by the majesty and the size of the divine form which manifested itself before him, the sanyasi prayed that the Lord condense himself in size so that it would be possible for him to see Him within his limited field of vision and offer puja. Accordingly, Bhagawan Vishnu shrank in size and ordained that pujas to Him should be conducted by Tulu Brahmins from the same part of the country from where Divakara Muni hailed. To this day half the number of pujaris in this temple continue to be drawn from the Tulu country in Karnataka.

Another generally accepted version of the origin of the temple relates to the Vilwamangalathu Swamiyar whose name is linked with the history of several temples in Kerala. This legend is almost identical with the Divakara Muni story related above. It is said that the Swami, a great Krishna bhakta, while offering prayers to his favourite deity used to close his eyes in meditation. Once, when he did so, a child annoyed him by disarranging the articles of his worship. And when the sage opened his eyes he disappeared. Enraged at the prank, he gave a blow to the child while his eyes were closed. At this, the child who was none other than Vishnu Himself ran away saying that he could be found only in the forest of Ananta.

The Swami did not know the place. He went in search of it. On the way, he heard a mother chastising her crying baby that if it did not stop crying she would throw him away in Anantan Kadu (Kadu meaning forest). The sage enquired of the mother the route to Anantankadu and went there. As soon as he reached the place, he heard the crash of a big tree and there the Lord Vishnu was lying on a thousand-headed snake in a big form.

Annual Festivals

There are mainly two annual *utsavams* at this temple - one in the month of Meenam (March-April) and the other in Thulam (September-October). Both are 10-day festivals with the inaugural flag-hoisting *(Kodiyettam)* ceremony on the first day, the *Pallivetta* (hunting) ceremony and procession on the 9th day and the *arattu,* the ritual bathing of the deities on the 10th day. On all these days, within the temple, there are elaborate pujas and ceremonial processions.

The *vetta* (hunt) and *arattu* (immersion) processions held twice a year at Trivandrum represent the universal truth that a spectacle will be complete only if the actors and the audience are brought together. Though they have not reached the dimensions of the Dasara procession at Mysore, they, in the words of J. H. Cousins, "exalt the simple movement of walking from one place to another into an art-ritual by acting on the art-principle that a spectacle without a spectator is a misnomer, and by unifying the mover and the looker in a symbolical significance that concerns both of them....The two processions are two phases of one transaction that is full of universal truth expressed with impressive art."

The idea is Vishnu as the protector of the universe sets out to hunt and destroys the demon of destructiveness. The *vetta* procession simulates the progress of Vishnu to the point when he runs the demon to earth in a forest. The climax of the myth takes place at a spot in front of the Sundaravilasam Palace in Trivandrum fort, where two hundred years ago, an attack, happily unsuccessful, was made on the life of Maharaja Marthanda Varma, whose devotion to the Lord found unique expression in his dedication of the state to Lord Padmanabha.

Here a pile of shrubbery stands for the forest and a coconut represents the hiding demon. The hunt takes place at night. The approach of flickering high-held torches tells of the coming of Deity on his redemptive mission. There is no music, no conversation, nothing that would raise the suspicion of the demon whose hiding place has been discovered. Then the Majaraja, the executant of the Divine Will, emerges and fires the arrow into the hiding place of the demon. Instantly, the silence is broken. Evil has been

destroyed. Music breaks out and the procession returns in triumph to the temple.

But the image of Vishnu cannot yet be returned to the sanctum and must remain outside the sanctuary until it is given a purificatory bath the next day. God, in overcoming evil, has to descend to the plane of evil, and in doing so suffers defilement. The image has thus suffered symbolical pollution by the hunt and cannot resume its deific position until it is purified. Thus, to quote Cousins again: “In this universal psychological law, so applicable to human action, particularly in peace following war, a law theologised and dramatised in the *vetta* procession at the level of Deity, rests the necessity of *arattu* procession the day following the *vetta.*”

Thus the famous *arattu* procession takes place on the 10th day of the *utsavam* in the late afternoon. The images of Sri Padmanabha, Krishna and Narasimha are carried out from the temple along the three-mile road to the edge of the vast Arabian Sea, at Sankhumukham, escorted by members of the princely family and armed police contingents, with temple accessories. At sunset, as per custom and tradition handed down through centuries, the deities are ritually bathed in the sea after appropriate pujas. An illuminated procession escorts the purified images back to the temple.

The two processions are perhaps the most exoteric in symbolising spectacularly the triumph of good over evil, the extirpation of that which obstructs the spiritual life and the attainment of purification and peace through the destruction of the passions. And if the temple is a representation of the cosmos, such ceremonials, carried out through the art of symbolical presentation, anticipate the final withdrawal of the external universe into the being of Brahma. Indeed, as Cousins concludes, “Assuredly art has no profounder impulse or vision.”

3. A TEMPLE FOR SERPENTS

The origin of snake worship goes back to remote antiquity. But in no part of the world is snake worship still such a live tradition as in Kerala. In almost every house the south-west corner of the compound is set apart for a snake shrine called *sarpakavu*. The propitiation of the serpent god is considered essential to the well-being and prosperity of the family. Incidentally, with snake worship came also the principle that what is feared is respected.

According to tradition, the first Aryan colonists settled by Parasurama found Kerala uninhabitable. So they left. Then the Nagas of the lower world came and occupied the land. When the Aryans came again they found the land occupied and waged war against the Nagas. Parasurama decided in favour of the early colonists and ordered that they should set apart a corner of their compound as an abode for the serpent gods.

It is said that the word 'Nayar' is derived from 'Naga', because of the special adoration they paid to snakes and possibly they belonged to the Naga race who settled in the heart of the Dravidian country. As evidence of connection between the Naga and the Dravidian is the grove found in every house for snake worship.

It was estimated that even over a century ago there were 15,000 serpent groves in the former Travancore and Cochin states alone. Of course there have been many additional ones erected since. One such grove is at Mannarsala, the abode of the snake king and queen, the most important serpent worship centre in Kerala. It is a small beautiful village about 3 km to the north-west of the famous Sree Subrahmanyaswami temple at Haripad.

Magnificent grove

The temple is situated in the midst of a magnificent grove covering an area of 16 acres. There are thousands of snakes of granite in this area covered with dense thickets. In the main temple there are two idols. One is of the Nagaraja or the snake king and the other of Sarpayakshi or the snake queen. On the northern side of the temple there is an *illam* or house whose heir is the oldest female member. She is called Nambiathy who performs puja in the temple.

According to legend the Mannarsala grove is the property of a family whose ancestors are said to have been spared when the Khandava forest of the Punjab was burnt by Krishna and Arjuna. Every male member of the family was called Vasuka, the name of the king of Patala, the great king of the Nagas.

Family Deity

According to another version, the site of the Khandava forest was the land from Avur in the north to Alleppey in the South. When Arjuna set fire to the forest the serpents fled in confusion to Mannarsala and prayed to God for protection. Then the earth miraculously cooled down. After the serpents found refuge, an ancestress of the Nambiathy had a vision to dedicate the groves and the land to Nagaraja, and to build a temple thereon. These commands were promptly obeyed and thence forward the Nagaraja became the family deity of Nambiathy.

The local tradition has it that a member of the Mannarsala *illam* married a girl from the Vettikad *illam* where the serpents were held in great veneration. The girl's parents, being poor, had nothing to give by way of dowry except one stone idol of a serpent of which there were plenty in the house. The girl took care of the idol and worshipped it daily. Soon she became pregnant and gave birth to a male child and a snake. The snake child grew up and gave rise to numerous progeny. These were all removed to a spot where the present grove is.

According to an estimate there are some 4,000 stone idols or *nagakals* in the grove. They have every imaginable shape crowned with one, five or seven cobra heads. Within the cloister are, however, human figures of Nagaraja and Naga Lakshmi or Sarpayakshi. Those who are not able to maintain *sarpakavus* in their house can bring them here and install in the compound. The visitor will also often find live serpents in the grove but they are not known to injure anyone.

The Priestess

The priestess, Valiamma, the eldest female member is considered to be the bride of Nagaraja from the day she assumes office. She is vowed to chastity and must cease relations with her husband, a Brahmin who bears the name of Vasuki, the mythical serpent king. She has compulsorily to stay in the house in the grove. She hardly goes out and when occasionally she has to visit nearby relatives she must return to her *illam* before sunset.

There are, however, certain days and occasions when the pujas are performed by male priests. On other days it is Valiamma who performs it. She alone can carry the image of serpents in procession. Again she alone has the right to the cellar in the *illam* where the guardian serpent dwells. The *illam* itself is considered a temple and should under no circumstances be polluted.

In Mannarsala, it is not the practice to keep vessels and other articles in a safe place. These are found scattered in varanda and courtyard. However, nothing is stolen from here as they are supposed to be guarded by serpents and no one dares to touch anything.

The annual *utsavam* at this temple is celebrated on Ayilyam of Thulam (October-November) when a large number of people visit it and make offerings of gold, silver, salt, etc. On this day the serpent gods are taken in procession to the *illam* of Valiamma and offerings of *neerum palum* (milk and water), flour, turmeric and boiled rice are made.

Offering of uruli

A unique offering here is offering of *uruli,* a small bell metal vessel, by childless couple. In this manner many couples are believed to have been blessed with children. The vessel offered is kept prayerfully by the couple before the sanctum, which is later removed by Valiamma to her *illam* and kept in a room. Hundreds of such vessels have piled up here, kept over the years.

There is a story about the origin of this offering. Once an elderly woman who had no issue came to the temple. She had no hope of getting a child at her age. Yet she prayed for a child. She also heard that the then priestess of the temple also had given birth to a child at a late age. She informed the priestess about her desire and the latter gave her prasad. She also offered food to the woman in a small *uruli*.

The woman found the vessel broken at the edge. She went to her home and returned with a new vessel. The Valiamma liked the beautiful vessel and kept it in her room. Soon after this incident the woman became pregnant and was delivered of a child. Since then both she and the Amma had great faith in the *uruli*. In due course more such vessels came from childless couples who were also blessed with children. It is said the original *uruli* is still kept in the *illam,* over which other vessels have piled up.

There is another place in Kerala famous for serpent worship. It is the residence of Pambumekkat Nambudiri near Irinjalakuda. This Nambudiri is the high priest of serpent worship and according to Gopala Panikkar, author of *Malabar and Its Folk,* his household is “full of cobras which find their abode in every corner of it. The inmates cannot move about without placing their feet upon one of the serpents. Owing to the magic influence of the family, the serpents will not injure them. They are said to be at the beck and call of the members of the family and render unquestionable obedience to their commands. They watch and protect the interests of the family in the utmost zealous spirit.”

4. THE GODDESS WHO HAS PERIODS

This writer set out for Chengannur from Alleppey on a December morning. The scenic beauty of Kerala is particularly enchanting during this 60 km. drive. The air is fresh and cool. The landscape is variegated. For the first few miles the journey is along the seacoast with its tiny fishing villages and nodding palms.

The seashore echoes with the voices and cheering of fishermen launching their elegant boats. Some of them are already out on the sea dancing over the waves. The scene is reminiscent of those described by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in his celebrated novel *Chemmeen.* The characters of this classical tale, Karuthamma and Pareekutti, Chembankunju and Chakki–children of Katalamma, the sea–goddess come alive before one's eyes.

As you turn inland from Haripad, narrow ribbons of roads zigzag through towns and villages which merge with one another. Thatched huts and modern bungalows. Temples and churches, shops and factories flank the road. When the land opens out, fertile and sunlit, the landscape is again lush with green vegetation–paddy fields, groves of coconuts and arecanuts, mango trees and banana plantations.

Chengannur is particularly *sasyasamala,* darkly beautiful with vegetation. The Pampa River flows through here, adding to the scenic beauty. The land is extremely fertile and anything grows here at the mere touch of human hand. With crops grown even on hillsides which form a picturesque backdrop, the whole place looks like a roof garden.

Chengannur in Alleppey district is also on the rail map, being the fourth station from Kottayam. A distance of 35 km. on the Ernakulam-Quilon section of the Southern Railway.

In the heart of this beautiful town is the famous Chengannur Bhagawati temple. The main central road linking Trivandrum with Alwaye runs on the east west side of this temple where an arch proclaims it as Mahadeva temple. The shrine is dedicated to both Parvati (facing west) and Parameswara (facing east) though it is better known for the Goddess.

There are other shrines in Kerala like Thirumandamkunnu, Kodungallur and Panayannar Kavu where the main *pratishta* is Siva but the importance

is for Bhagawati. How does one account for this?

This writer met octogenarian Balakrishna Varrier who had served the temple as an attendant for forty years. Explaining the phenomenon he half-jokingly asked me: “Have you heard it said that Siva becomes *sava* (corpse) without his consort, Uma?” Then he quoted the first sloka of Saundarya Lahari :

“Siva saktya yukto yadi bhavati saktahprabha vidtum
na chedevam devo nakhalu kusalah spanditumapi
Atastwamaradhyam Hari Hara virinchadibhi rapi
pranantum stotum va kathamkritapunyah prabhavati.”

‘Parameswara becomes capable of creating the universe only when united with Sakti (Thee) but otherwise he is incapable of even a stir. How then could one who has not acquired merit (Punya in this and previous births) worship Thee or at least praise Thee who is adored even by Vishnu, Siva, Brahma and others.’

Such is the greatness of Parasakti who is commonly worshipped as Lakshmi, Parvati and Saraswati. There are scores of other names by which devotees of Devi know her–Annapoorni, Rajarajeswari, Bhuvaneswari, Lalithambika, Durga, Bhadrakali and so on. The Chengannur Bhagawati is supposed to be Bhuvaneswari.

The eternal and essential union between Siva and Sakti is expressed in another beautiful verse which says: *Sakti is immanent in Siva, and Siva is immanent in Sakti. I see no difference between the two as between the moon and the moonlight.’*

The moonlight has no existence apart from and independently of the moon, and the moon also though (figuratively speaking) self-existing and self-shining has no separate existence except through the moonlight inherent in its nature.

The Legend

There is a legend describing how Siva and Parvati came to reside in Chengannur. It was the wedding of Parvati and Parameswara at Mount Kailas. All the thirty three crores of devas and asuras had assembled for the occasion. It looked as though the earth would tilt towards the north because of the undue weight that side. Siva grew anxious. He summoned sage Agastya and requested him to proceed to the south to maintain the balance.

Sage Agastya felt sorely disappointed as he would miss the celestial wedding. Parameswara understood his feelings. He assured him that he would see everything through divine sight. Further, He promised that after the marriage ceremony He with his consort would come to the South and grant him darshan.

Accordingly sage Agastya journeyed towards the south and selected that part of the Sahyadri called Sonadri for his meditation. True to his word, Siva went there with Parvati and blessed Agastya. While there the Devi had her menses. The divine couple therefore stayed here for twenty-eight days after the purificatory bath.

It is a wonder of wonders that even today the deity which is cast in *Panchaloha* gets her periods, a phenomenon which is not heard of in any other temple.

“In olden days it used to occur regularly every month. Now only three or four times a year,” said Shri Madhavan Nambudiri, the *melsanti* or the head priest of the temple speaking to this writer.

He or his assistant *(kizusanti)* on opening the Srikoil early morning removes the *nirmalyam* (previous day’s decoration of the deity) and hands it over to the Varrier attendant along with the white *udayada* (petticoat) without looking at it. The Varrier examines the dress closely and if there are signs of bleeding sends it to Thazhamon Matham, the traditional residence of the temple Tantri. There the lady of the house scrutinises the cloth again and confirms the menses.

The *udayada,* after the occurrence, is available for sale to the public. Though the rate fixed by the Devaswom is only Rs. 10/- due to its being a

rarity it is grabbed by devotees by paying hundreds of rupees, booking it well in advance. Among the dignitaries who bought this, we are told, are the late Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar and ex-President Shri V. V. Giri.

The sanctum is kept closed for three days when the Goddess gets menses. During this period a small vigraha is installed in a secluded room on the north-west corner of the *nalambalam* and pujas are conducted there. On the fourth day, the bathing ceremony-*Triputtu arattu* -is conducted by taking the image in procession on a female elephant to the nearby Pampa River. Innumerable devotees, especially women with *thalapoli* (holding lamps), accompany this.

On return, Lord Siva mounted on an elephant awaits the arrival of his consort and receives her ceremoniously. The deities then enter their respective sanctums and the normal puja for the Goddess is resumed. It is considered auspicious to witness the event especially for happy marriage, progeny, wealth and prosperity.

The story of Col. Munro

Sceptics may scoff at all this, but this is what happened to those who did so: Colonel Munro was the Resident-Divan of Travancore during the reign of Rani Laxmi Bai (1810-14). It was he who organised the takeover of almost all the temples in Travancore by the Government.

Once in this connection he was camping at Chengannur with his family. While checking the temple accounts to regulate the various expenses he came across the items against *Triputtu.* He could not help laughing at the naivety of the people. “How can a metal deity get its periods?” he mused. “It is not only absurd but also obscene,” he said and cut out the budget provision for the ritual with a stroke of his pen.

At the same time the Devi had her period. For the first time the ceremonies with it were suspended. The people felt disappointed. But the Colonel also learnt his lesson. His wife started to have heavy bleeding and their children took ill.

So serious they became that it is on record that the Maharani of Trivandrum made solicitous enquiries about their health through a letter sent with a special messenger. Munro’s clerk conducted a secret *Prasnam* which revealed the wrath of the deity. He advised his master accordingly. Munro repented for his thoughtless action and made ample amends by not only restoring the expenses for the function but also by himself donating a sum of Rs. 700/- for the celebration of the first *Triputtu* of every year. This still continues. Needless to say that his wife and children recovered from their illness.

M. C. Narayana Pillai was Thasildar of Chengannur. He was over-zealous and in his enthusiasm decided to perform the 28-day *utsavam* of the temple in December-January in a very elaborate manner. This festival went on without any hitch for 25 days. But on the 26th day the Goddess had menses. Pillai was crestfallen at the thought of having to suspend the festivities.

He directed those concerned to hush up the matter and the festival continued as if nothing had happened. And he came to grief. His wife had unusual menstrual bleeding. Pillai atoned and made a special offering. Then only did his wife get relief.

Sati's immolation

There is yet another legend regarding the origin of the temple. Daksha showed disrespect to Siva, his son-in-law, by not inviting him to the sacrifice he performed. Because of this, his daughter, Sati who attended it disregarding Siva's advice was also slighted. Resenting the insult to her and her husband she immolated herself by jumping into the sacrificial fire.

The grief-stricken Siva carrying the charred body of Sati wandered here and there in desolation. To relieve him from this situation, Mahavishnu with the aid of the *Sudarsana chakra* cut Sati's body into pieces. Wherever her limbs fell the place acquired Siva's *chaitanya.*

At Taliparambu the head fell, at Chengannur, the *yoni mandala* or the female reproductive organ, which explains why the Devi gets her monthly periods here. It is significant that at both these places the image of Siva is *swayambhu* or self-born.

It is also believed that the image of Bhagawati is that of Kannaki whose husband, Kovalan, was executed by the Pandya king on a false charge of theft of the queen's anklet, foisted upon him by the royal goldsmith. In her anger Kannaki plucked off her left breast and hurled it at the city of Madurai which began at once to burn.

She thus came to Chenkunnu in Kerala and did penance under a tree. Kovalan appeared before her in a *vimana* and took her to heaven. Deeming her to be an incarnation of Kali or Mother Goddess, Senkuttuvan, a Chera king, went north and brought a stone from the Himalayas to be set up as her image. It was consecrated as "Chengamalavalli" with great pomp and ceremony. Thus Chengannur finds mention in *Slippadikaram* composed by llango Adikal who was none other than the brother of Senkuttuvan.

It may be pointed out that Sonadri translated in Malayalam became Chenkunnu. Adding *ur* that is village, it became Chenkunnur or Chengannur.

Thus the earlier temple at Chengannur is believed to have been built by the Cheramans. Later, Nambudiris who were brought here by Parasurama decided to renovate the same. (Of the sixty-four villages into which Kerala

was divided after the advent of Nambudiris, Chengannur is the southern-most.) The Nambudiris were very prosperous and wealthy and were above all devout. They therefore planned to build a really big, elaborate shrine. They approached the renowned temple architect, Perunthachan, the Viswakarma of Kerala.

Devout Brahmins

Perunthachan arrived at Chengannur one early morning by boat through the Pampa River. What he saw flowing down the river at that early hour astounded him - *Tulsi* and *thechi* flowers, *darbha* grass, plantains, sugarcane pieces and other ingredients of worship and *homa*. He was struck by that extreme devotion of so many Brahmins residing on the banks of the river and engaged in such rituals in such early hours. He thought that these Brahmins would grow so prosperous that in course of time non-Brahmins would be handicapped. So he decided to make slight deviations in the silpa sastra in constructing the temple.

Thus the *Mukhamandapam* in front of the Siva sanctum where Brahmins chant Vedas was made purposely low preventing the occupants from having a direct view of the deity. The *Kuttambalam* which ought to be located to the right side of the shrine is constructed right in front to obstruct view from outside.

However, a mishap took place to Perunthachan himself. While he was working on the top of the eastern tower a chisel slipped from his hand and fell on his son who was working down below. He was instantly killed. It is said that Perunthachan was really jealous of his son’s workmanship.

Perunthachan’s faulty planning of the temple had also the desired effect - many Nambudiri *illams* became extinct and out of about five thousands prosperous Brahmin families only 20 to 30 survived.

The Vain Astrologer

There was yet another incident which brought about the ruination of the temple built by Perunthachan. In 1724 A. D. the Yogam or the temple administration decided to conduct *ashtabandhakalasam* for the prosperity of the temple. Krishnattu Pillai, a prominent astrologer who lived on the east side of the temple, was entrusted with fixing the *muhurtam* or auspicious time for the ceremony. He fixed the 8th of the Malayalam month Meenam. The time: at about noon when a peacock would come flying and perch on the pinnacle of the *srikoil*.

Accordingly every arrangement was made for the function. The temple and its vast courtyard were full of people scanning the skies for the peacock. They waited and waited. It was noon, yet there was no sign of the bird nor of Pillai himself.

The situation provided an opportunity for another astrologer of the place, Muthathu, to wag his tongue. He was no match for Pillai and was naturally jealous of him. He, therefore, not only spoke in derision, but when a Pandaram beggar was passing through the western gate with a bundle of peacock feathers he took it as the arrival of the peacock and advised the authorities to go ahead with the ritual.

Just after the completion of the ceremonies Pillai himself came on the scene. He was perturbed by what he saw. Since the function took place at the wrong time, he said that it would spell ruin to the temple. Right enough, in a few months a disastrous fire gutted the eastern gopuram, *Kuttambalam* and a major portion of the *mandapam* and several parts on the eastern side of *nalambalam*.

Unfinished Kuttambalam

The present structure is the one renovated after the fire. As a precaution against future fires stone masonry was adopted for the renovated temple. The progress of renovation work was extremely slow. After constructing the *srikoil, nalambalam* and *mandapam* the work was in suspension for several years. In 1812, Resident-Diwan Col. Munro, as mentioned earlier, took over Chengannur under Governmental control along with other temples. The renovation was however completed later under the Diwanship of Shri Rajagopalachari.

The oval-shaped *Kuttambalam* is, however, still incomplete; a three-foot base is all that remains. It is said that no artisan is available today to undertake the job according to the plan of Perunthachan. The original building built by Perunthachan himself contained many pillars which, night or day, did not cast any shadow.

The temple sprawling on a six-acre area is a massive one by Kerala standards, comparable to big temples of Taliparamba, Vaikom, Trichur etc. The three-tiered eastern gopuram leaves you spellbound.

As one enters the temple through this gateway there is first the *anakottil* (literally shed for elephants) which is a modern structure. Beyond this is the unfinished *kuttambalam,* described before. In front of this is the gold-covered flagstaff. Then *Balikalpura* which leads to the big *mukhamandapam* beyond which is the *srikoil.*

Exquisite carvings

The image of Siva is fully visible only if one stands between the sanctum and the *mandapam*. The *srikoil* is circular in shape like Vaikom and Ettumanur but much bigger in shape. The roof covered with copper plates is enormous, sloping steeply downwards.

The Bhagawati, as already mentioned, is also housed in the same *srikoil* but facing west. There is a passage inside connecting both the deities. The *mandapam* in front of her shrine is comparatively small. So also other structures like *anakottil* and gopuram.

The outer wall of the *srikoil* and the pillars and ceiling of the eastern *mandapam* have fine wood carvings depicting scenes from the Puranas. They speak of the artistic skill of the carpenters of those times, for which Chengannur and nearby Thiruvalla were famous. It is on record that Marthanda Varma who built the famed Sri Padmanabhaswami temple at Trivandrum took these artisans for wood work.

The image of Siva which is self-born is not chiselled into any shape. The deity is said to represent the forlorn Siva after his separation from his consort, Sati, after she cast off her body. It is, however, adorned with a gold cover with the image of an attractive Ardhanariswara - half-man and half-woman - of about 3 feet height.

The idol of Bhagawati was originally in stone. Since this was damaged in a fire it was replaced by one made of *panchaloha*. According to legend the *vigraha* was found in the river by fishermen.

It is a beautiful image of about 2.5 feet height with pleasing aspects. With eyes resembling the petals of a lotus and a gentle smile playing on the lips the face resembles the full moon’s orb, beautiful like the splendour of gold.

Benign Bhagawati

The Devi has two hands with *varada* (grant of desires) and *abhaya* (freedom from fear) postures. She is *satodari* (of slender waist), *komalangi* (delicate-limbed) and *sarvabharanabhushita* (adorned with every ornament). With a profusion of brass lamps in front, the image glitters in red and gold splendour. Gazing at her, whose eyes are full of compassion, one indeed experiences exuberant transcendental bliss.

There are *upadevatas* too in the temple - Ganesa to the right of Siva and Chandeesan, one of Siva's servants to the north-west. Outside the temple there is a Sasta shrine on the south-west corner, to its north Neelagriva and Sthaleesan on the north-west. Outside the west gopuram there is a Krishna temple with Ganga and Jatadhari as *upadevatas*.

The *uttupura* or feeding shed is on the northern side of the courtyard. Outside the temple wall on the north is the vast temple tank called *Saktikunda tirtham*. It is said that when the first menses of the Goddess took place *homa* was performed at this place, which became gradually a lake. Now it is full of weeds and in an utter state of disrepair.

There are giant peepal trees on all sides of the courtyard which enhance the natural beauty of the place. The tree on the right side of the west *nada* is specially significant. Those possessed and suffering from evil spirits get rid of their ailments here, by driving a nail into the trunk of the tree as at Chottanikara.

Ceremonies like *annaprasanam,* marriages etc. take place on the west *nada*. One always finds here devotees observing bhajan for a certain number of days in fulfilment of a vow or simply to propitiate the gods.

Suryanarayanan was in the employ of His Highness Sri Ayilyam Thirunal (1860-80) under whose reign Travancore became a model state. His Highness had some serious misunderstanding with him. So he expelled him from the state. The poor man somehow managed to return to Thruvalla on the sly and sought refuge with Vidwan Bhattatiri. The latter gave him some divine mantras. Armed with this the Brahmin repaired to Chengannur.

Pushpanjali

There he conducted *pushpanjali* or archana daily, reciting the mantras himself and the priest offering the flowers. In this manner he spent 41 days worshipping Bhagawati. At the same time a change took place in His Highness. He thought of recalling Suryanarayanan and sent his men in different directions in search of him. By the time Suryanarayanan had completed 90 days bhajan, the Maharaja's men at last came to Chengannur and found him. He was produced before the king who appointed him to a much higher post - Thasil Magistrate. Thereafter he held several responsible posts till his death.

Every year he came at least thrice to Chengannur to offer worship. It was from this time that *pushpanjali* became a regular offering here. Devotees offer this today in their hundreds and achieve their cherished desires.

At Kumbhakonam there was a rich Rayar. His wife was possessed by evil spirits. It was so terrible that she went completely mad during spasms of attack. Rayar tried all the available treatments including mantras but to no avail. Finally on somebody's advice he proceeded to Rameswaram. On the way at Madurai they met Yajnavesa Sastry who advised them to proceed to Chengannur.

Accordingly the couple arrived here and started bhajan and *pushpanjali* worship daily. On the fortieth day the woman was rid of all the spirits and became normal. She donated all her jewellery and made various other offerings to the deities before returning to Kumbhakonam, hale and hearty.

There are scores of instances like this. Not only those possessed but also those mentally deranged and afflicted with incurable diseases come here for worship. Chottanikara and Ettumanur are two other temples in Kerala famous for the cure of such ailments.

The terror that is west nada

There is one more feature of west *nada* which strikes terror into the minds of devotees. That is taking the oath. Inside the west gopuram on the right side there is a hole. The man taking the oath had to insert his finger in this hole and then swear. If he utters any falsehood woe to him and a serpent strikes him dead instantly. Because of this no one is prepared to swear here. The very term "Chengannur west nada" thus became synonymous with terror.

There is an interesting legend behind this. Once a *paradesi* or man from Tamil country came here and boasted that no one could match him in curing poison, particularly from snakebites. At Chengannur there was an ancient Brahmin family quite famous in the art. But only a widow and her twelve-year-old son were the survivors in their family when the Tamilian visited Chengannur.

One morning the boy went to pray at the temple. When someone pointed out that the boy belonged to the famous line of Vishavaidyas the Tamilian challenged him. The boy told his mother about it. The same night he had a dream in which the Naga king appeared before him and pointed out to him a small pipe with a fierce cobra inside.

As bid by the Naga king the boy took this pipe before the Tamilian next morning and unleashed the serpent. The frightened boaster immediately admitted fear and entreated the boy to save him. At the bidding of the boy, the snake withdrew within the pipe.

The Tamilian deposited all his medicines in a pit near the *kuttambalam* and covered it with a stone slab and left the place. It is believed that those who stand on the stone and pray looking at the *srikoil* need have no fear about sankebites.

As for the boy he made a hole to the south of the passage of the west gopuram and installed the pipe there. It is this hole that is used for the oath-taking.

But despite all this Chengannur Bhagawati is essentially of a benign aspect. She is Mother Goddess, the personification of love towards her devotees,

She is:

Sarvalamkarayuktham Satatamabhayadam
bhakta namram bhavanim
Sri Vidyam Santa murthim Sakalasuranutam
Sarvasampat pradatrim.

She who dispels fear, whose devotees bow before her, who is the embodiment of peace, who is Srividya herself, who is praised by the Gods, and who gives every kind of wealth that is sought.

5. ARANMULA PARTHASARATHI

Of the numerous Krishna temples in Kerala, the five foremost are Guruvayur, Trichambaram, Thiruvarppu, Ambalapuzha and Aranmula. The Lord Krishna at Aranmula is depicted as Parthasarathi, the divine charioter. The temple is reckoned among the 108 shrines referred to in the hymns of Alwars as sacred to Vaishnavites. It is more popularly associated with the age-old water carnival, widely known as the Aranmula *Vallomkali* or boat race, the most famous among the water festivals held in Kerala during the Onam season.

Aranmula, a beautiful and picturesque village, is about 9 km. from Chengannur. The temple is situated on the left bank of the Pampa River embosomed in the exuberant foliage of majestic trees.

Legend has it that the idol which is worshipped at Aranmula had originally been installed at Nilakkal, a few miles to the south of Sabarimala. The Pandava brothers after crowning Parikshit as emperor of Bharat left on a pilgrimage visiting various holy places. In Kerala each brother installed his own *ishta devata* on the banks of the Pampa and nearby places and offered worship. Among them the one at Nilakkal was that of Vishnu installed and worshipped by Arjuna.

Nilakkal in those days was a forest inhabited by some thousand souls. In course of time it became uninhabitable due to scarcity of water and frequent attacks by Marava marauders. The inhabitants were thus forced to make an exodus and they carried their idol with them. The merciful Lord Himself in the guise of a brahmachari wandered along the banks of the Pampa and showed them the place to live in. That was Aranmula. Since the people carried their idol in a raft made of six bamboo pieces the place acquired the name Aranmula (*'aaru'* being six and *'mula'* meaning bamboo). Some hold that the name may be a corruption of *"Arin Vilai",* that is a land fringed by a river.

The Mahabharata Episode

The Lord at Aranmula is believed to represent a profound moment in the Mahabharata war. It was the ninth day of the battle. There were fierce combats. The Pandavas attacked Bhishma, the grandsire, who fought furiously and beat them back. The Pandava forces were thoroughly demoralised and were fleeing hither and thither. Krishna halted the chariot and said to Arjuna : “Partha, you and your brothers were looking forward to this day, after thirteen years. Do not hesitate to kill your grandsire. Remember the duty of a soldier.”

But Arjuna did not like to kill his grandsire and the teachers whom he loved. He fought just to obey Krishna but his heart was not in the fight. Seeing this, Krishna jumped down in a rage from the chariot and taking up his discus, advanced towards the grandsire.

Bhishma saw Vasudeva approaching and cried “Hail O Lotus-eyed One! Blessed am I to be separated from the body by you! Come, come!”

Arjuna also jumped down from the chariot and rushing forward, held Krishna and cried: “Do not break your pledge. You have promised not to use weapons in this battle. This is my work. I shall not fail.”

Saying so Arjuna resumed the battle. While Krishna thus made Arjuna to fight, he took the weapon also to honour the word of Bhishma who had vowed that he would make Krishna take up weapon in the war. With Arjuna at the back and Bhishma in front Krishna shone with his discus in hand to bestow blessings on both his devotees.

It is this Krishna we see in the image of Aranmula, pleased with the unsurpassed devotion of his staunch devotees and ready to do their bidding. This connotes that we should give up our attachment to the material body and surrender ourselves to the charioteer. He (the Lord) will take care of the chariot. He is the servant of the bhakta, his teacher. He is also his relative and friend. Entrust everything to him. All will be well.

There was a Nambudiri Brahmin or Bhattatiri in a house called Mangattillam in Kattoor (literally a village of forests) some 6 km. east of Aranmula. He was an ardent devotee of Krishna and every month on

Thiruvonam asterism he would feed a Brahmin after washing his feet as per custom. Once in the month of Chingom (August-September) he could not get a single Brahmin for the function. Bhattatiri was upset and did not know what to do. Suddenly a Brahmin appeared from nowhere and the much-pleased householder conducted the ceremony happily.

Origin of Boat-race

He requested the Brahmin to come again for the ceremony next Chingom. But the latter replied that he could be seen at Aranmula temple. He was none other than Hari who revealed Himself to the Brahmin in a dream.

The next year, Bhattatiri left for Aranmula with 51 *paras* of rice and all the other materials for the feast and reached the temple in the early hours of Thiruvonam day. He also incurred all the expenses for pujas for the day in the temple. The *thoni* or boat carrying all these goods to Aranmula is called *Thiruvonachilavu thoni.* The tradition continues to this day.

Once, the legend goes, the chieftain of Ayiroor, a nearby village, planned to intercept the traditional boat carrying the materials to Aranmula because the boat was being escorted by the dependents of the chieftain's sworn enemy, the Ranni chieftain. The news spread like wild fire and men from twenty-eight *Karas* decided to thwart the attempt. Fully armed, they escorted the sacred boat in their own *chundans* or snake-boats to the temple, thus frustrating the chieftain's plan.

The custom of snake-boats from all nearby localities accompanying the sacred boat, however, came to stay. It was also decided that this ritual should be held not only on Thiruvonam day in the month of Chingom but also on Uthrattathi day on which falls the anniversary of the consecration of the idol. This in brief is the story behind this unique water festival which is witnessed every year by thousands coming from far and near.

The Feast

Snake-boats from thirty *Karas* from Chennithala in the west to Ranni in the east participate in the *Vallomkali.* They assemble at the temple ghat from early morning and sail ahead in pairs. The course is about two hours long. This is however not a competitive race like the boat-races held at Champakulam, Payippad, etc., for a trophy or a prize. It is only a traditional repetition of solemn religious custom.

It may be of interest to know that *chundan vallom* or snake-boat is about 103 feet in length. Its prow is about 5 feet above water level and the stern about 18 feet. In a boat there will be four helmsmen, 100 rowers and 25 singers singing *Vanchipattu* or boat-songs. After the feat there is an elaborate feast in the temple popularly known as *vallasadya* which is arranged by devotees as offering to the god.

The Mangat Bhattatiripad referred to above in course of time shifted his residence to Kudamaloor near Kottayam. He had then donated all the landed properties lying east of Aranmula to the Parthasarathi temple. The festival is now conducted by the Government and the Travancore Devaswom Board.

It is said that an idol of Lord Parthasarathi has been installed at Bhattatiripad’s Kudamaloor residence also and pujas offered by special pujaris.

6. AMBALAPUZHA KRISHNA — ANANDA PERSONIFIED

Once Pooratam Thirunal Thampuran, the Brahmin ruler of Champakasseri (which was a small principality now known as Ambalapuzha) was travelling in boat accompanied by sage Vilwamangalam Swamiyar. They suddenly heard the melodious strains of the flute. The music emanated from the south-east corner of the present temple at Ambalapuzha, where a peepal tree stands. The sage, the ardent devotee that he was of Krishna, at once recognised that the music was that of the Lord. Therefore he and the ruler got down, circumambulated the tree and prostrated themselves before it.

Vilwamangalam Swamiyar thus helped the Thampuran to have a vision of Sri Krishna in the same way as he had helped Manaveda Zamorin to see God. Inspired by this the Zamorin wrote the *Krishna Gita.* Now the Thampuran was inspired to build a temple and install a Gopala or cowherd Krishna at the spot. Accordingly a beautiful temple was built and an idol of Sri Krishna in black granite stone was carved out for installation. While elaborate arrangements were being made for the consecration, it was found to the dismay and disillusionment of everyone that the idol had been damaged on the left side and was therefore unfit for installation.

Disappointment

This was pronounced by the learned Puthumana Valia Nambudiripad who was to officiate at the ceremony. The ruler, the various dignitaries and the vast multitude who had assembled for the function were stunned and felt utterly disappointed at this. Someone even challenged the Tantri to prove his point. It did not take long for the Tantri to do so, well-versed as he was in mantras, tantras and sastras. All he did was to tap with a piece of iron at the damaged spot and out jumped a frog and some dirty liquid!

The Thampuran felt most unhappy at the turn of events. It was again Vilwamangalam Swamy who came to his rescue and advised him to get the idol of Parthasarathi from Kurichi, a neighbouring place belonging to Thekkumkoor Raja. But it was not an easy job because the Thekkumkoor Raja was not on friendly terms with the Champakasseri Thampuran. If the idol was taken by force, a fierce contest might follow between the two rulers and who could forecast that the Champakasseri Thampuran would come out successful in the contest? And if the idol was stolen that would be unbecoming of a ruler and in any case it would be unfit for consecration being tainted by the sin of stealth.

Dilemma

The Thampuran thus found himself on the horns of a dilemma. However, after considerable deliberation he executed the following plan. The Thampuran's minister went to Kurichi and quietly got permission from the owner of the idol. The same night the minister, accompanied by a handful of soldiers, reached the border of Thekkumkoor by country boats. They stayed behind in their tents while at dead of night the idol was removed to the boats. Then the soldiers opened fire into the air, proclaimed aloud by beating their drums that they were taking home the idol by force and that anybody who dared to check them might do so.

The soldiers of Thekkumkoor woke up from their slumber but they did nothing to stop the intruders and prevent the loss of merely a granite stone image. Next morning the minister and party arrived at Champakulam *madom* where the Thampuran went to receive the idol which was ceremoniously taken to the temple. This event took place on the Moolam day of a Mithunam (June-July). It is to commemorate this that the Champakulam boat-race is held every year. The idol was duly installed in the temple at a propitious time on Thiruvonam day in Mithunam in 1613 A.D.

Surrender to the Deity

This is the origin of the famous Sri Krishna temple at Ambalapuzha. It is said that in the old Travancore State, seven temples were considered great among the great temples. These were: Kanyakumari, Suchindram, Trivandrum, Haripad, Ambalapuzha, Ettumanur and Vaikom. Of these, Kanyakumari and Suchindram have now gone to Tamil Nadu. Further it is believed that in Kerala there are three god-made Krishna idols. These are at Guruvayur, Tripunathura and Ambalapuzha. Such is the greatness of Ambalapuzha temple.

The Pooratam Thampuran after consecrating the temple surrendered his State to Sri Krishna and ruled the country as His vice-regent assuming the name of Devanarayanan. There is a story behind this. Once the king expressed his keen desire to Vilwamangala Swamiyar to see Sri Krishna in flesh and blood. The Swamiyar agreed but asked the king; “What would you offer to the Lord? Even Kuchela offered Krishna beaten rice.” To this the king replied that he would offer his all including the kingdom, which he did when the sage himself offered puja the next day when the ruler did see the sacred hand of the Lord extended to bless him.

When the last ruler of the Champakasseri dynasty was defeated and taken prisoner by Marthanda Varma it was only after placing the key of the State granary and the royal treasury at the feet of the Lord that he surrendered to the enemy.

During the invasion of Tipu in 1790 A.D. the deity of Sri Krishna installed in Guruvayur temple was brought here for safe custody and installed temporarily in a room to the south of the temple. After the retreat of Tipu, the idol was taken back to Guruvayur. This spot is still held sacred here and is known as Guruvayurambalam, the temple of Guruvayur.

Famous for Palpayasam

The Ambalapuzha shrine is famous for its *palpayasam,* a milk porridge of exceptional sweetness. As Nalamkal put it, it is one of the wonders of Kerala. This is the most important offering at the temple at the *uccha* (noon) puja. There is a legend behind the introduction of *palpayasam* as an offering.

Once the Champakasseri Thampuran had borrowed some paddy from a Brahmin belonging to Thalavady. For some reason, the Thampuran could not repay the same for a long time. One day when the ruler came to the temple for darshan the Brahmin accosted him and demanded his paddy immediately. The Thampuran asked his minister to clear off the debt and left the place.

The poor minister was in a quandary. There was no sufficient stock of paddy to clear the debt. Somehow he managed to collect the required quantity from nearby houses and measured out the paddy in the *Anakottil* on the east side of the temple to the satisfaction of the Brahmin. But the minister asked the Brahmin to remove the entire paddy before the midday puja as otherwise it could cause inconvenience to the rituals to be conducted on the occasion. He also made it clear that if the Brahmin failed to remove the paddy within the stipulated time it would be confiscated to the temple.

The poor Brahmin ran hither and thither but could not get a single porter to remove the paddy. The clever minister had seen to it. In the meantime the sanctum sanctorum was closed for the midday puja. The Brahmin stood perplexed and helpless. When the *Srikoil* was opened he wrote a will donating the entire paddy to the deity. He also stated that daily *palpayasam* should be prepared and after offering it to the deity at midday puja the same should be distributed to the poor people. This is the famous Ambalapuzha *palpayasam,* the taste of which is indeed unique. Its colour is golden, not white and has a special flavour.

Time was when whatever quantity of milk available for sale in Ambalapuzha was purchased and the entire *payasam* was distributed free. But now only a limited quantity viz. 12 litres of milk, 9 kgs rice and 16 kgs

of sugar are used and this *naivedyam* is available only for sale in limited quantities.

Kunchan Nambiar, the famous Malayalam poet-satirist and exponent of Ottam Thullal, was associated with the Ambalapuzha temple since he was for several years a member of the court of the ruler of Champakasseri. When the principality was annexed by Marthanda Varma of Travancore in 1754 Nambiar too migrated to Trivandrum where he enjoyed the patronage of that ruler and his successor. He is said to have returned to Champakasseri in 1765 and died within a few years.

The ten-day annual festival of the temple commences with the flag-hoisting ceremony on the Atham day in Meenam (March-April). The *arattu* utsavam takes place on Thiruvonam day i.e. the tenth day. But much importance is attached to the ninth-day festival. On this day the famous *Natakasala* (dance-hall) *sadya* or feast is held in honour of the Marars, the traditional artists who play the percussion instruments.

In ancient days nearly 900 *paras* of rice was cooked and pure boiled milk was supplied for drinking, instead of water. This would indicate how grand this feast used to be.

There is a story behind the *Natakasala Sadya.* Once on the ninth festival day, Vilwamangalam Swamiyar came to worship at the temple. He could not see the Lord in the sanctum. He came out and saw the Lord serving food to the Marars. When the sage expressed his surprise the Lord told him: “These are the artists who contribute to the success of my festival. Therefore, I am myself serving them.”

There used to be feasts on other days of the festival also. On the first day 100 *paras* of rice was cooked, on the second day 200 *paras* and so on, each day 100 *paras* being added. Such was the lavish scale in which *utsavams* were conducted in olden days. In fact in the erstwhile Travancore state, the *utsavams* at four temples were foremost. Ambalapuzha was one of them, the other three being: Haripad, Ettumanur and Vaikom.

A celebration called Vijayabali is conducted in this temple. This comes once in one hundred and forty-four years. The last Vijayabali was conducted in the year 1955. Pallipana is another festival conducted once in twelve years.

The Vigraha at Ambalapuzha looks like Prathasarathi with a whip in the right hand and *shankha* in the left. But the deity is worshipped as *Unnikrishna* or child Krishna. Let us recall the beautiful description of Krishna in Lilasukha's *Srikrishna karnamritham.*

Kasturitilakam lalataphalake, vaksahsthale Kaustubham,
nasagre navamauktikam, Karatale venum Kare Kankanam,
sarvange harichandanam ca kalayan, Kanthe ca muktavalim
gopastriparivestito vijayate gopalacudamani.

7. SABARIMALA

Of the many famous temples in Kerala, two are most well-known to those outside the state. They are the Guruvayur temple dedicated to Sri Krishna near the seacoast in central Kerala and the Ayyappa temple of Sabarimala in the Western Ghats in south Kerala.

While Sri Krishna is a living deity to every Hindu home from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, Ayyappa, the beloved god of Keralites is peculiar to Kerala since it is there that he enacted his human drama. His glory is, however, spreading far and wide drawing millions every year - the main pilgrimage season is from mid-November to mid-January when *Mandala Vilakku* and *Makara Vilakku* festivals are held.

There are temples dedicated to Dharma Sasta as Ayyappa is generally known all over the State of Kerala - and now of course, in other states also. Even in temples dedicated to other deities in Kerala there will be generally a Sasta shrine. However, there are five important temples along the hilly tracts of the Western Ghats founded by the legendary Parasurama. Dharma Sasta is represented in different stages in these temples.

Thus at Kulathupuzha, the first of these, He appears as Balaka or child, at Aryankavu as a Brahmachari, at Achankovil as a Grahastha with his two consorts, Poorna and Pushkala, at Sabarimala as Vanaprastha and at Ponnambala medu (the hill of the golden temple) or Kantamala as the highest yogi.

The last-mentioned temple, which is not yet explored, is believed to have been built by sages on a forest-covered mountain opposite Sabarimala on the eastern side. The miraculous appearance of the celestial light at Sabarimala every year on Makara Sankranti day is believed to emanate from this spot.

The Sabarimala shrine is thus the most important and popular of the Sasta temples in Kerala. It is also the most significant because the pilgrimage to the shrine symbolises the struggle of the individual soul in its onward journey to the abode of bliss and beatitude. The path of the spiritual aspirant is always long, arduous and hazardous. And so is the pilgrimage to

Sabarimala, what with the observance of severe austerities and trekking up forested mountains, risking attacks from wild animals.

Indigenous Deity

The advent of Dharma Sasta is unique in the annals of Hindu religion and peculiar to Kerala. Legend and history are so intermingled in the genesis of this deity that it is difficult to sift one from the other. According to some Puranas and folk-songs of Kerala, He was born out of the union of Vishnu and Siva.

The story is that Siva was captivated by the charms of Mohini in which form Vishnu appeared at the time of churning of the Ocean of Milk in order to entice the asuras so that the devas could divide the nectar among themselves. Siva succumbed to the beauty of Mohini and Sasta is believed to have been born out of the union.

Thus He is called Hariharaputra - Son of Vishnu (Hari) and Siva (Hara) - and is regarded as the third son of Siva, the other two being Ganesa and Muruga or Kartikeya.

This is how His Holiness Jagadguru Sri Sankaracharya of Kanchi describes the phenomenon: “When the merciful charm of Narayana and the serene *jnana* (knowledge) of Siva combined, an effulgent light *(tejas)* was the outcome. Out of this *tejas* was born Ayyappa also known as Ayyanar, Sasta or Hariharaputra.” The word Ayyappa is derived from Aryan (one worthy of reverence) and *appa* or *appan* meaning ‘Father’ in Malayalam.

Ayyappa thus embodies in Himself the qualities of both Siva and Vishnu. He manifested Himself in various forms at various times. In Kerala, He descended as the child Manikanta (so called because of the golden bell around his neck). He was found on the banks of the river Pampa by the king of Pandalam who took the child to his kingdom. He was brought up with love and care as the king and queen were childless. Subsequently, the queen gave birth to a son and both the children grew up as brothers.

Legend

When the time came to appoint a heir apparent the king decided to anoint Manikanta, the elder of the two. The queen however resented this and wanted her own son to be crowned. With the connivance of some wicked ministers, she devised a way to get rid of Manikanta. She feigned illness and the royal physician prescribed leopard's milk as the only remedy to cure her. As was expected, Manikanta readily offered to bring the rare medicine. He set out for the forest much against the king's wishes. He carried on his head a bundle containing a coconut and some food for use on the way.

In the forest Manikanta met Mahishi in battle and killed her. This was in fact the purpose of his *avatara* on earth. He then returned to Pandalam mounted on a tiger carrying the leopard's milk. The king and the subjects were frightened by the sight and the king realised that his son was none other than the God Himself and sought His mercy. He implored the Lord to reside permanently in his kingdom. The merciful Lord condescended and advised the king to build a temple on Neelimala to the north-east of the Pampa where Sabari was doing penance seeking eternal salvation.

The pilgrimage to Sabarimala is reminiscent of the Lord's journey to the forest to fetch leopard's milk. The *Irumudi* or two-compartment cloth bag which the pilgrim carries on his head is said to represent the bundle which the Lord Himself carried. It contains in the front compartment a coconut filled with ghee - the main offering to the deity - and in the rear, articles of food required on the way.

History

As far as history is concerned, it revolves around the troubled times that prevailed in the kingdom of Pandalam at the very early period when the depredations of a robber chief called Udayanan rocked the whole country. The hill tracts of the Western Ghats were dotted with several villages and each village had Ayyappa as the guardian deity. Udayanan and his followers, bent on defilement and plunder, laid waste to these villages and shrines including Sabarimala.

The purpose of the *avatara* of Lord Ayyappa was to restore order in the country and to renovate the temple at Sabari Hill. Ayyappa fulfilled the mission in due course and thereafter entered the sanctum sanctorum and disappeared. It is believed that He re-united with the Supreme. Thus the Sasta temple at Sabarimala has the additional halo of Ayyappa, a name which stirs the emotional chord in every heart.

The ever-effulgent and merciful Lord of Sabarimala has been a psychological refuge to millions who seek His darshan annually. He sheds light and peace as Kaliyuga *varada;* He is a giver of boons. He is *tarakabrahma* - one who helps mankind to cross the ocean of *samsara.*

Unique Pilgrimage

The pilgrimage to Sabari is unique in several ways. First there is the physical and mental cleansing of the devotees by the hard penance *(vritham)* they have to observe for 41 days preceding the pilgrimage. During this period they have to observe strict abstinence from mundane pleasures - a penance unique to Kerala.

Shouting of *Saranam* (surrender to God) is a prominent feature of the pilgrimage. Pilgrims trekking to Badrinath and Kedarnath shout 'Jai Badri' and 'Jai Kedarnath' as the case may be. Similarly, Sabarimala pilgrims shout *Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa* - O Lord Ayyappa, I come to Thee for refuge - in the true spirit of what Lord Krishna advised Arjuna to do in the Gita; *Sarvadharman parityajya* (abandoning all dharma), *mamekam saranam vraja* (take refuge in me); so that He could redeem him from all sins.

Then there is the long arduous trek through mountains, valleys and forests abounding in wild animals. Of the three routes available to reach the sanctum, the one via Erumeli is the longest - about 72 km. - and the most arduous. This is also the most sacred because it is believed to have been traversed by Ayyappa Himself. The easiest route, however, is via Chalakayam near Pampa upto which vehicles ply nowadays. From Pampa only one mountain - Neelimala - is to be crossed. Hence this is preferred by the majority of pilgrims nowadays.

Peculiar again is the eighteen steps *(Pathinettampadi)* leading to the sanctum sanctorum. Nowhere the steps of a temple are held as sacred as those at Sabarimala. Only those who observe the 41-day austerities and carry the *Irumudi* can climb these steps.

Feeling of Ecstasy

The feeling of ecstasy and the spiritual elevation one attains after visiting the Ayyappa shrine at Sabarimala is something quite indescribable. This explains the fact that pilgrims who once undertake the yatra repeat it year after year.

The entire pilgrimage is symbolic of the soul's journey to unite with the Supreme - the summum bonum of life. On the way, the pilgrim consumes the contents in the rear portion of the *Irumudi,* i.e. the *prarabdha karma* and worldly desires. What remains is only the body (i.e. the coconut) and the ghee (the soul). The soul merges with the Supreme when the ghee is poured on the idol. The body dies when the coconut is thrown into the fire after abhishekam.

Lastly, the temple doors of Sabarimala are open to all, irrespective of caste, creed, religion and social status. Here, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, meet on equal terms; all are alike - Ayyappas as the devotees are called after the deity itself.

The essence of the Ayyappa cult thus lies in its unique stress on healthy asecoticism, religious fervour and the spirit of equality and camaraderie permeating one and all.

8. THE FIERCE LORD OF ETTUMANUR

Nalamkal Krishna Pillai in his essay on Ettumanur in his book - *Mahakshetrangalku Mumpil,* narrates the following incident: An acquaintance of his did not have an issue for several years after marriage. When his wife conceived she vowed that the first feeding ceremony for the child would be performed at the Siva temple at Ettumanur. She gave birth to a son. When the time came for *annaprasanam* she reminded her husband about her vow.

But the husband thought otherwise. Going to Ettumanur from their place - Mavellikkara - would be tedious as it involved changing two or three buses, leave alone the expenses. Why not conduct the ceremony at the nearby Kandiyur temple which is also a Siva shrine like Ettumanur? He argued. And his wife relented.

After two or three days the child took seriously ill with diphtheria. The doctor gave up all hopes. The couple thought it was the wrath of Ettumanurappan, the Lord of Ettumanur. They lighted a lamp in their puja room and prayed for the cure of the child vowing that they would visit Ettumanur and conduct the feeding ceremony besides depositing Rs.101/- in the hundi as atonement. Lo! The child was cured and they fulfilled the vow.

This indicates how fierce the Lord of Ettumanur could be whereas Lord Siva of Vaikom is ever benign towards His devotees. Vaikathappan gives his all to devotees, asks nothing in return and is easily pleased. Whereas His counterpart at Ettumanur, like the Lord of Tirupati, is *Vaddikasula Vada* - one who takes his dues with interest. He is very difficult to please and demands sincere devotion and severe penance from us. But once pleased he is bhakta dasa, showers all prosperity on them for life here and liberation hereafter.

No Hypocrisy

The benign and fierce aspects of the two gods are, perhaps, to emphasise the different moods of Siva, namely, *Vatsalya* (love for dependents) and *Roudra* (fury). It is believed that the prathishta itself at Ettumanur is as an *Aghora* (fierce) murti. Hence He instils fear and discipline in his devotees. He expects them to be pure in mind, word and deed and approach him with sincere devotion. There is no room here for hypocrisy or short-cuts.

Once a very rich miser opened his money bag to offer *kanikka* during the annual *utsavam.* His bag contained several gold and silver coins, and when he fished, a gold coin came in his hand. But he thought it was too much. He therefore dropped it back and picked up a silver coin which he offered. But when he went back home the whole bag was missing!

In case we commit any mistake knowingly or unknowingly the only way to redress is to ask for forgiveness of the Lord. Let us repeat the following prayers which Smt. M.S. Subbulakshmi soulfully recited in every concert of hers:

Kara-charana-kritam vaak-kaayajam karmajam vaa,
Shravana-nayanajam vaa maanasam vaa (a) paradham,
Vihitamavihitam vaa sarvametat kshamasva,
Jaya Jaya karunaabdhe shree Mahaadeva shambho.

(Oh Lord, forgive my wrong actions done knowingly or unknowingly, either through my organs of action (hands, feet, speech) or through my organs of perception (ears, eyes) or by my mind. Glory unto Thee Oh Lord, who is the ocean of kindness.)

Ettumanur is located 11 km. to the south-east of Kottayam town. The temple is about a furlong from the bus stand. Ettumanur is also a railway station on the Ernakulam - Kottayam section of the Southern Railway. The temple is nearly 2 km. from the station. One can spot the lofty western gopuram - which is the main entrance since the deity faces west - and the golden flagstaff glittering in the sun from quite a distance.

The Celebrated Big Lamp

The temple is four or five feet below the road level. As you enter it through the *Balikalpura* or altar-house, you come across the celebrated *Valia vilakku* or the big lamp, which you have to worship first before having darshan of the main deity.

This lamp is said to have been installed in 1545 A.D. and its wicks have been burning ever since. An important *vazhivadu* or offering is pouring oil in this lamp. It can contain nearly 3 litres of oil. As every devotee pours oil, the overflow is collected in a huge vessel placed below the lamp. The spill-over thus collected is so much that it is sufficient for the annual festivals of the temple. The soot collected on the cover of the lamp is applied to the eyes as it is believed to cure eye - diseases. People possessed by evil spirits also get liberated here by making vows after worshipping to this holy lamp.

There is a story behind this lamp. The present temple we see is the one renovated in 1542 A.D. Soon after, one evening, some temple servants were standing in front of the west tower and passing their time chit chatting. At this juncture a bell-smith came and placed reverently a beautiful lamp before them. With folded hands, he requested them to keep it for the temple use and give him something for the night's gruel. At this one of the servants admired the beauty and fine workmanship of the lamp. He thought it glittered like gold and wondered who could pay for it. He added that if it was lighted it would be very auspicious for the temple.

Another among them spoke rather light-heartedly to the bell-smith's request to pay him something. Said he: "Ettumanurappan only takes from his devotees, he never gives."

Yet another remarked: "It is alright, we can buy the lamp. Who will fill this up with oil? Surely it won't burn on water."

To this, the poor bell-smith replied: "Who knows the divinity of the Lord? If He wills this will burn even without oil or water. In any case if it is hung inside the temple any devotee will pour oil and it will be kept burning."

As he said this, someone from inside the temple came running, took the heavy lamp inside and fixed it in the present location. Soon there was

thunder and some closed their eyes unable to see the lightning, while a few fled for safety. After the thunder and lightning stopped, everybody was surprised to see the beautiful lamp burning brightly with five wicks and full of oil.

Resemblance to Vaikom Temple

Now let us go inside the temple. It bears a close resemblance to the Vaikom Siva temple though smaller in size. Its central shrine like the one at Vaikom is circular in shape surmounted by a conical roof covered with copper plates with a *stupi* of copper gilt at the top. In front of the *garbhagirha* is a raised platform, the *mukhamandapa,* square in form, where there are two images of Nandi (Bull) - one finished in stone and the other made on an alloy of copper and tin.

The metal bull used to contain paddy, the grains of which can be taken out through one of the holes. This is said to be an effective remedy for stomach trouble. Now it is doubtful whether it contains any grain. This bull had been offered by one of the Chambakasseri Rajas. Once he was suffering from some severe stomach ailment. He came to Ettumanur and observed bhajan for 41 days. He was cured. He wanted to offer a big feast as in Vaikom. But that night the Lord of Ettumanur appeared before him in a dream and told him that he did not want any feast and that he might make a cash offering. Accordingly, the Raja made offering in cash and gold. He also offered the metal bull filled with paddy.

Beyond the *mukhamandapa* are corridors or pillared halls, all round the sanctum and *mukhamandapa*. The whole edifice is rectangular in shape, and on its exterior has columns of lamps fixed on a wooden framework covered with metal trellis-work. In all, fourteen *thazhikakudams* or *stupis* adorn the temple roof which are all covered with copper sheets.

Outside the temple, beyond the *balikalpura* is the golden flagstaff. In line with the flagstaff there is the circumambulatory path for temple processions or for devotees taking rounds. Midway between the flagstaff and the gopura is the *anakottil* where elephants take their stand for the temple procession.

According to an inscription on the base of the central shrine the repairs to the present temple were begun in the year 1542 and the consecration ceremony was performed in 1545. Indeed the central shrine stands out for wall carving, a major art in Kerala. There are admirable pieces of wood sculpture, the whole of the Ramayana story is carved with striking beauty as also scenes from Santanagopala, Krishnaleela and Bhagavata.

Beautiful Carvings

As R.V. Poduval in his essay, *Kerala Wood-carving,* describes: “The carvings in cornices, brackets and architraves are also of a high order of excellence. What distinguishes the wood-carvings at Ettumanur is their singularly clear-cut and beautiful style. The artist has displayed here a fine sense of form, skill in executing the traditional ideas, and with them a delightful free play of his fancy.”

Talking of arts, the paintings on the western gopura, the main entrance to the temple is worthy of mention. It is, as Dr. Coomaraswamy has described in his book, *An Introduction to India Art,* the only old example of Dravidian painting. The theme in one of the pictures, that of Siva as Nataraja, trampling underfoot the spirit of evil represented by a demon is considered a landmark in the history of the Kerala School.

To quote R.V. Poduval again: “The dance that is depicted in the mural is supposed to illustrate the mental and physical energy of the Creator. The pose and balance of the figure of Siva are a marvel of pictorial art.....The figure radiates bliss, glory and peace. It inspires joy in his worship and strikes terror in the mind of the wicked. His lips show intense sweetness, his eyes representing the Sun, Moon and Fire are radiant with emotions suggesting celestial bliss.”

Glittering Image

Coming back to the central shrine, the image of the Lord of Ettumanur which faces west is represented in a two-foot high Siva linga installed on a high pedestal in the innermost recess of the sanctum sanctorum. To enable devotees to meditate on an image, a beautiful vigraha is placed in front of the Linga after the morning *abhisheka.* Adorned with flower garlands and decorated with diamond necklaces and gold ornaments the deity glitters and looks so attractive that one can hardly take off the eyes from it.

Several yogis have prayed at this shrine and have been saved. As Sri Sankara sang: *"Punarapi jananam punarapi maranam....."* Born again and again, dying over and over again.... people continue to suffer the vicissitudes of life. Only by His Grace can we cross over this ocean of repeated life and death.

To the north of the *srikoil* there is a Sasta shrine with its beautiful stone image. On the south side there are shrines of Ganapati and Dakshinamurti. Just at the back of the Siva image i.e. on the east of the *srikoil* Goddess Parvati is imagined and worshipped. There is a door here but it is never opened. On either side of the entrance of *srikoil* there are images of Dwara-palakas which are very attractive.

Annual Festival

The annual festival at Ettumanur is in the Malayalam month of Kumbham (February - March). It lasts ten days and is a very major festival in Kerala, like Ashtami festival at Vaikom or *utsavams* at Haripad and Ambalapuzha. Though the finale, like all Kerala temple festivals, is the *arattu* festival on the last day - which comes on Thiruvathira asterism - the eighth day is the most important day of the festival, when devotees throng the temple in their thousands. Especially after midnight on that day there is *'asthana mandapa'* darshanam, when the Lord's image is installed in a specially erected *mandapa* in the north-east corner. The *mandapa* is tastefully decorated with flowers, leaves and red coconuts and the golden idol glitters in the profusion of lights.

Nalamkal recalls in his essay the occasion when he had this splendid darshan in 1962 when the night atmosphere was filled with the melodies of the late Nadaswaram Vidwan, Karaikuruchi Arunachalam, who was singing *"Sabhapatiku veru daivam samanamakuma....."* Is there any god equal to Sabhapati or Siva?

As at Vaikom, during Ashtami here also a large copper vessel is kept in front of the deity wherein devotees drop coins - *kanikka idal.* Even misers are liberal in their offerings of cash on this occasion and in any case no one leaves after the darshan without making any offering.

A unique sight on the eighth and tenth day of the festival at Ettumanur is the exposition of the seven and half elephants of gold - *Ezhara ponnana.* These elephants were offered to the deity by the then ruler of Travancore, Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma, as atonement for the destruction of temple property caused in his campaign to annexe territory after territory. These were made of gold weighing seven and half *thulams* (one thulam = 28 lbs). Each of the seven elephants is two feet high and the remaining one is of one feet only - hence they are together called seven and half elephants. They are supposed to represent the guardians at the eight points *(Ashtadikpalas).*

The tradition was that if eight elephants were made, one had to be given to Ettonnesseri *Illam.* Therefore only seven and half elephants were got finished, seven of the same weight, height and size and the other as a baby

elephant. A large number of people flock to the temple during festival days to see these golden elephants.

Ettumanur is a very prosperous and wealthy temple. These golden elephants described above, conches studded with jewels, arecanut bunch of gold, musical instruments, pot of gold set with jewels, caparison of gold, silver bull, various diamond necklaces and gold ornaments form part of several valuable possessions of the temple.

Legends

Once Parameswara created a deer (*maan* in Malayalam) and a huge island for the deer to play. This was near the present Devagiri, a picturesque place about 5 km. north-east of Ettumanur. When Parasurama created Kerala out of the ocean this island became part of the entire land of Kerala. And the place which in Sanskrit was known as Harina dweep (Harina meaning deer) when translated into Malayalam became *Manoor,* the place *(oor)* of deer *(maan).*

The Maniman Tirtham described in Vamana Purana and Padma Purana has been at this place. Thus it got the name Mani-manoor, which in due course became Manoor. According to another tradition the place where Khara, Vyasa and Siva got mental bliss came to be known as Ettumanoor.

Legend has it that it was the Sage Khara who installed Siva at Ettumanur. It was the same Khara who installed the Sivalinga at Vaikom and Kaduthuruthi as described in the chapter on Vaikom temple. It is always held meritorious to have the darshan of these three temples on the same day.

Long ago Khara conducted intense penance to propitiate Siva who appeared before him and asked to name any boon he desired. Khara requested that Siva should always be with him. Khara was an expert at assuming various shapes of man and beast. One day he wished to ramble like a deer. Siva who followed him through hills and dales got completely exhausted and finally unable to follow the deer carried it in his hands. So the place where the deer was carried by Siva became in Malayalam - *Ettiya* (carried) - *Maan* (deer) *ooru* (place) which came to be known at Ettumanur.

According to another version, Khara had a disciple, known as Pingalan. At the end of his Gurukula education of the disciple wanted to give Khara a good amount by way of Gurudakshina. But he was penniless. Yet he pestered his Guru as to how much he should give him as dakshina. The Guru became angry and said: “Ten thousand crores of gold coins.” When Pingalan could not afford even a hundred pieces how could he find such a large amount?

Intense Penance

Seeing the predicament of his disciple, the Guru decided that they both would undertake intense penance to propitiate the Gods. This they did at Harina dweep. First Mahavishnu appeared before them. As per their request Bhagawan granted them all the ten thousand crores of gold coins. Then Siva appeared before them. With the gold coins he got, Khara performed abhisheka on Siva - *kanakabhisheka.* Immensely pleased, Siva gave them another ten thousand crores of gold coins. With this they performed *abhisheka* to Mahavishnu also. After his duty fulfilled Pingalan took leave of his master and left the place.

Khara continued to stay there worshipping Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Siva). Siva was further pleased and granted him a Sivalinga which is now worshipped at Ettumanur. On the north-western corner of the temple facing east Khara installed an image of Mahavishnu also. This is known as Balagopala temple - *keezhtrikoil.* Some people are of the opinion that the Krishna temple was installed by Khara in order to temper the fierceness of Siva of Ettumanur.

Once a Pandyan King named Chanda Bhaskara was possessed by an evil spirit. All the medical treatment and mantras were of no avail. So he prayed to the Deva of the Ettumanur temple and recovered from his affliction miraculously. It is said that it was he who constructed the Ettumanur temple.

Wilderness

Once Lomaharsha, a disciple of Sage Vyasa, came to the temple to have darshan of Siva. He got down into a nearby tank but slipped and fell. At this, the onlookers burst into laughter. The sage was wild at this insult and cursed that the place would turn into a wilderness, denuded of population. Thus under the spell of this curse, this place remained for a thousand years a thick forest inhabited by wild animals.

During one of these days Sage Vilwamangalam came to the place. By then the period of the curse was over. Due to his divine insight Vilwamangalathu Swamiyar discovered the Sivalinga and offered puja with the plantains and molasses he had brought for his food. Even today, these articles are given as the first offerings *(Naivedyam)* to the deity.

He also resurrected the Vishnu image at the northeast corner and re-installed it in the temple known as *keezhtrikoil.*

Vilwamangalathu Swamiyar entrusted the administration of the temple to Asthamangalathu Moothatu. Later it devolved on eight *illams* called Ettonnesseri, Mangathu, Pattamana, Ayunganikkal, Chirakka, Punnekkel etc. which are around the temple. Thus the place came to be known as *Ettumanakalute oor* i.e. the place of eight *illams* which ultimately became Ettumanur.

In 1754 A.D. the administration of the temple was taken over by the then Travancore ruler. Later in 1812 it was taken over by the Travancore Government. Now it is under the Travancore Dewaswom Board.

9. THE BENIGN LORD OF VAIKOM

Vaikom is 33 km. south of Ernakulam and 40 km. north-west of Kottayam. It can be reached by bus or by rail. There is also the inevitable launch for those fond of cruising on the scenic backwaters (of Vembanad).

It is a quiet, unimpressive place, but it is famous for its Siva temple and for this reason acclaimed as Dakshina Kasi. Its golden *tazhikakudam* at the pinnacle beckons you from quite a distance. Life in this little town literally revolves round the deity. It is endearingly called Lord of Vaikom or Perumthrikovilappan or simply Vaikathappan. His name is ever on the lips of devotees.

Every morning and evening the place comes to life with hundreds of devotees thronging the shrine with chants of *"Namasivaya", - "Hara Hara Mahadeva", "Shambho Mahadeva",* Old people cry: *"Hara Shankara Siva Shankara Duritam Kala* (remove all ills) *Sivane."* The younger ones pray for a job or for promotion or for children. The sick ask for health. Parameswara grants everybody's wishes.

Annadana Prabhu

The life of people here is intimately connected with the deity because he has been *Annadana Prabhu* - Giver of food. Till a few years ago the temple regularly ensured food at least to hundreds of people belonging to the 'upper' castes. Tonnes of rice were cooked and the dishes had a unique flavour. In the *uttupura* or feeding shed (a two - storeyed building, more than 1,000 feet long) attached to the temple, people sat in long rows and baskets of steaming rice were emptied on to their plantain leaves. They mixed the rice with *sambhar* and *pappadams* and ate with audible relish. Other caste Hindus also had their share.

On special occasions like the Maharaja's birthday or the Maharani's death anniversary there were feasts with delicacies made of jack-fruit and coconut milk. The number of courses ran upto hundred on these days.

Now, thanks to shortage of foodstuffs, rationing and a general change in attitudes, feasts are held on a much smaller scale and at longer intervals. Nevertheless, offering of food or *'prathal'* as it is called is still a favourite *vazhivadu* to the Lord. As the food offered is considered as prasad, everyone, from pauper to prince, partakes of it. Nay, the food is even said to possess curative powers in ailments alike stomach-ache, ulcer, etc.

There are innumerable instances when sufferers of these ailments have got cured here. In 1965, the present writer experienced acute pain in the 'pit' of the stomach particularly when hungry. He always carried biscuits in his pocket to relieve pain at unexpected moments. Gastrointestinal analysis established Duodenal Ulcer as the cause of ailment and the doctor advised surgical treatment. Meanwhile, along with treatment by drugs, the food offered at Vaikom was taken. Today several years later there is no trace of any ulcer or any other ailment in the stomach.

The Big Kitchen

What is the secret of the popularity of feasts? Once a Maharaja of Trivandrum invited all the cooks of Vaikom - traditionally Muttas Nambudiris - to cook for a feast at the palace. The ingredients for different dishes were supplied in exactly the same proportion as at Vaikom. Yet the taste did not match that which obtained at the temple. An enraged Maharaja questioned the head cook. The chief's reply was: "No doubt all ingredients were supplied and the cooks were also the same but there was one thing missing - the "big Kitchen" of Vaikom temple. The king understood that the kitchen at Vaikom was blessed by Vaikathappan and sent the cooks away with valuable presents.

Incidentally, it is the ashes of this kitchen on the north-east corner of the *nalambalam* that is served as *Vibhuti* to devotees visiting the temple.

Even the cutting of vegetables here is an art. It is a task undertaken hereditarily by a group of sixteen Nair families. Once a member of the royal family found three or four bunches of big bananas being carried away from the temple store. Suspecting theft, he called the persons. To his surprise they were only peels left intact after removing the kernel with dexterity for making chips. The Raja was pleased at their artistic skill and gave them gifts.

Once the saint Vilwamangalam came to Vaikom for darshan. He could not find Bhagawan in the sanctum. He therefore walked around and found him having his meals on the raised platform on the northern side of the *garbhagriha*. He was being served by none other than Parvati. This spot is still held sacred called *Manyasthanam,* where a plantain leaf is laid with all dishes served during feasts and a lamp lit.

It is still believed that Parameswara partakes of the food during the feasts along with the Brahmins. The devotee offering *prathal* circumambulates the temple. After the feast the chief priest opens the closed sanctum and offers prasad. This darshan is called *ananda darshan*. So much for the sanctity of feasts.

Vaikom, otherwise a quiet place, became famous for an event of considerable social and religious importance as explained in the

introduction.

Origin

What is the origin of the deity and the temple? The Vyaghrapuri Mahatmya of the Bhargava Purana alludes briefly to the history and divinity of the deity.

Khara, an asura of the Ramayana, attained Yogic powers through years of severe penance. At the instance of 'Malyavan' the preceptor of the asuras, he propitiated Lord Nataraja at Chidabaram. Moved by his devotion the God granted him several boons and also three Sivalingas.

Khara took hold of the lingas - one in each hand and the third in his mouth and journeyed through the sky southward. On the way he was overcome by the weight of the objects he carried and hence was constrained to descend and rest for a while. He set the linga in his right hand at a sacred sport, knee-deep in water. After a while he resumed the journey and tried to remove the linga but it would not move, try as he may, with all his might.

At this juncture, Saint Vyaghrapada appeared on the scene. Khara was waiting exactly for this. He entrusted the linga to the care of the saint and proceeded to Ettumanur, 25 km away, where he installed the left-hand linga. The one in the mouth was deposited at Kaduthuruthy, midway between the two places.

Thus the three spots - Vaikom, Kaduthuruthy and Ettumanur - were sanctified simultaneously. It is also believed as stated in the previous chapter that darshan at these places on the same day is highly auspicious.

Vyaghrapada, a great saint in his own right, worshipped the Sivalinga at Vaikom with extreme devotion. Thus in due course the place also acquired his name - Vyaghrapada puram of 'Vyaghrapuri' and ultimately Vaikom for short.

Legend has it that Siva and Parvati pleased with the devotion of Vyaghrapada gave darshan to him under a peepal tree to the south of the eastern gateway. The place is still marked by a young tree with a raised platform where a lamp is lit daily and special pujas are held. It was in the early hours of the morning on Ashtami day, in the dark fortnight of the month of Vrischikam (November-December), that Vyaghrapada had the

divine vision. This day is celebrated as part of the annual Ashtami festival, when, to have early morning darshan of the idol, is considered very auspicious.

Associated with Parasurama

The installation of the idol and the construction of the temple is attributed to Parasurama, an incarnation of Vishnu who, as is now well-known, had consecrated several temples sacred to Siva and Vishnu for the spiritual well-being of the people of Kerala. One day while being airborne northward his eyes chanced upon the beautiful linga at Vaikom, radiating glory all round. Overwhelmed with joy he descended to the spot and embraced the linga in knee-deep water.

He raised a square platform by heaving up earth and installed the linga on it according to Sankarshana rites. It is on this square that the present temple stands. The platform is about 2 feet in height and the linga itself is about five feet.

Parasurama also brought Brahmins for the performance of puja and established the various rites to enhance the divinity of the idol. It was he who also arranged for the conduct of the Ashtami festival. It is enjoined that whoever offers a bilwa leaf or a coin or a lamp on the day is liberated in this world and the next.

Flawlessly Finished

This is how Ronel Bernier describes Vaikom temple: “In a spacious green setting that is almost empty of subsidiary building the temple appears flawlessly finished. The temple is elliptical. It is topped with a cone-shaped roof that is absolutely geometrical, covered with copper and crowned by a dazzling gold *stupi*. The height of the *tala* or wall is barely one-third that of the colossal roof. And the total effect is one of pure form in space.”

The linga is decorated with flower garlands and rare jewels including *Trinetras* or Siva’s three eyes and crescents. In the glare of hundreds of oil lamps that are lit the idol radiates splendour and provides an eye-filling sight.

K. V. Saundara Rajan reveals that the temple at Vaikom is datable to the 11th or 12th Century, that its deity was then known as Vaikkarattu-Bhatarakar, that its wooden panel walls were added in the 15th - 16th centuries, and that a second renovation in the 18th century treated the murals. Retouching of the largely Siva oriented wall paintings has been expensive and the colours are probably brighter than their original appearance.

To lovers of art these paintings provide a veritable fare which bring out all the grace, dignity and spiritual nobility of the figures depicted.

The Vaikom temple is a good specimen of indigenous style of temple-architecture of the sixteenth century. According to Stella Kramisch, temples of circular plan are of greater significance and beauty than those built on square plan and their origin may be put as the sixth century A.D. Examples of circular temples outside Kerala are also rare.

In front of the garbhagriha is a raised platform or the *mukhamandapam*, square in form, where the image of Nandi (Bull) is placed. Beyond it are corridors of pillared halls all-round the sanctum and the *mukhamandapam.* The whole edifice is rectangular in shape and on its exterior has columns of lamps - *vilakkumatam* - formed on a wooden framework covered with steel trellis works.

The temple faces east and in front there is a covered shed known as *Anakottil* where the elephants take their stand in line for the temple procession. The 317-foot-high gold covered flagstaff is also based here. And beyond it is the circumambulatory path paved with stones for taking the image of the God in procession round the temple.

The *uttupura* or the feeding shed is on the northern side and beyond it is the temple-tank. The area of the entire temple is nearly eight acres. There are four gateways - one on each side but they are not imposing like other temples in the South. There are three or four majestic peepal trees in the courtyard, which add to the scenic beauty.

Pananchikkal Bhagawati

On the southern side of the temple courtyard there is a small shrine for Goddess Pananchikkal. This is a Vana-Durga exposed to the sun and rain and as such without any roof.

Once there was a Yakshi (demi-goddess of evil aspect) roaming in the temple premises, harassing humans and animals. The terrified people approached Vyaghrapada Maharshi for protection. The sage turned to Stambha Vighneswara on the north-eastern side of the temple at the entrance (There is another image of Ganapati inside the temple.)

Vighneswara cast a significant glance on Trisuli, one of his attendant *bootaganas*. Trisuli, meaning literally three-pronged dragger, cut the woman into three pieces. The trunk was thrown on the southern side of the temple where the shrine stands, the head, at Muthedathu Kavu, 4 km. away, and the legs at Kuttummel to the north of the temple. From these the respective goddesses arose.

The Yakshi in a previous birth had been a Gandharva damsel, by name, Neelakuntala. Conceited by her personal beauty and charm she once mocked at Sage Agastya and his disciples returning to their ashram after worshipping Vaikathappan. The enraged rishi cursed her as a result of which she became a Yakshi. She begged forgiveness and was promised liberation at the hands of Trisuli.

Two Tantris

The Tantriship (priest well-versed in Tantras or science and art of temple worship) at Vaikom was originally from Menattu *illam* near Udayanapuram. Some 500 years ago when the temple caught fire the Menattu Tantri at great personal risk went into the sanctum and protected the linga from the enveloping flames. In the process he became unconscious. However when he came to he gave up the Tantriship.

One Mekkattu Nambudiri succeeded him. During his time a strange episode occurred. There was no male member left in the Puthusseri family who were the traditional drummers at the temple. There was only a pregnant woman who found herself in a quandary. The annual festival had already begun during which *utsavabali* or offering of oblations to spirits is an important ritual. Drumming is part of the ceremony which is mostly action and gestures in tune with certain *talas*.

The woman approached other Marar families and requested them to take over the function. But they refused unless they were given permanent rights which the woman did not want to part with. She could not sleep that night and she was tossing on her bed, thinking and worrying. In this state she heard an incorporeal voice urging her not to worry but go ahead and do the drumming herself.

Thus she took up the position during the *utsavabali* the next day. But her drumming was so fast and yet so perfect that the Tantri could not keep pace with her. Not only that the percussion was so loud that it aroused the temple spirits which approached the terrified Tantri with open mouths for offerings.

It was at this juncture the Mattappalli Tantri appeared on the scene. The hapless Mekkattu Tantri requested him to help and the latter completed the function successfully. It was thus that Vaikom came to have two Tantris. The Puthussery family members are still the official drummers.

The Ashtami Festival

The annual festival of the temple and the most important event of the year - is Ashtami in the month of Vrischikam as mentioned earlier. It is a 13-day festival, the main event, Ashtami being on the 12th day and *arattu* or holy bath for the deity, on the 13th.

In fact, the Vaikom Ashtami is considered so auspicious that it is observed throughout Kerala with special poojas to Vaikathappan.

At the temple on each of the 13 days there are special programmes, poojas and rites, elephant processions, public feeding, music, dance and other entertainments. Thousands from the neighborhood attend these functions.

The celebration reaches its peak on Ashtami Day. The early morning darshan - the time when Siva and Parvati gave darshan to Vyaghrapada under the peepal tree - the feast at noon and the procession at night from Udayanapuram are the salient features.

From the early hours of the day, devotees crowd the temple chanting holy names. This is followed by darshan at Udayanapuram about 3 km. to the north of the Vaikom temple, on the Vaikom - Ernakulam road. The presiding deity here is Lord Subramanya, son of Siva. (The temple is described in chapter 22 - A Round-up).

The main event of the Ashtami occurs at night when the happy meeting between Vaikathappan and Udayanapurathappan or the Lord of Udayanapuram takes place. It is believed that the son had gone to battle with the asuras and the meeting is an occasion for the father to greet the triumphant son.

The coming of Udayanapuram deity with Gods and Goddesses of the neighbouring temples on gorgeously caparisoned elephants accompanied by nadaswaram and hundreds of torches (*Theevattis*) is a spectacular sight. There are other famous temple processions in Kerala like the Trichur Pooram and the Arattupuzha Pooram in which several elephants participate. But the procession from Udayanapuram is singularly grand and hundreds of thousands gather to witness this symbolic meeting between father and the son.

The Celestial Meeting

Renowned Nadaswaram Vidwans like Rajaratnam Pillai, Karaikurichi Arunachalam and Veeraswami Pillai used to accompany the procession. They inevitably played Dikshitar's composition - *"Shree Subrahmanyaya namaste - namaste ... manasija koti lavanyaya namaste....."* In the stillness of night the audience stood spellbound hearing the melody.

The 2 -km. procession from Udayanapuram takes nearly 3 hours to reach the north gate at Vaikom at about 1.30 a.m. During the period the 300 *theevattis* or torches consume nearly 100 tins of oil. All the while, Vaikathappan, the father, mounted on the elephant, stands impatiently to meet his beloved son. The meeting takes place at the east *nada* to the accompaniment of another moving song in praise of Paramasiva. *"Thiruvati sharanam nambi vandhen devati deva...."* The splendour of this divine meeting is to be seen to be believed. Devotees wipe tears of joy from their eyes and offer *kanikkai* (offering of money) to the deities.

Thereafter father and son take a round of the temple and then the equally touching farewell takes place at the northern gate. The rendering of Khandara or Neelambari ragas lends pathos to the occasion.

Koodi Pooja

The next day the holy bath ceremony (*arattu*) takes place at the tank (*arattu kulam*) about a kilometre from the east *nada*. For this function also the lord of Udayanapuram comes to Vaikom. After the *arattu,* a koodi (joint) pooja takes place for both father and son in the sanctum. This ritual is again unique and not seen in any other temple in Kerala. There is no more auspicious occasion for the devotees than the *koodi* puja and naturally they gather in their thousands, with whole families. *Annaprasanam, Thulabharam* and various other *vazhivadus* also take place at this time.

After the ceremony Vaikathappan also goes to the son's place and has his holy bath there. There again *koodi* pooja takes place.

It is significant that on Ashtami day there is no pooja or *naivedyam* at Vaikom temple. Vaikathappan himself observes a fast, prays for his son's success in battle, while feeding thousands as an act of penance. The feast on Ashtami day is particularly grand. It is the rule that everybody must be fed sumptuously on this day.

Sahasrakalasam and Sandhya Vela

It is well known that Siva is *abhishekapriya* - lover of ablutions. Parasurama, during his worship of the linga here, is believed to have bathed the deity with *sahasrakalasam* or a thousand pots of holy water according to Vedic rites. Now this is a regular form of offering here ranging from ordinary people to the Prince of Travancore.

It is a costly offering though, the expenses amounting to nearly Rs.10,000/-. It is a ten-day function, each day an offering of 101 *kalasam* or pots of holy water being made - 100 pots of silver and one of gold at the centre - all filled with water and surcharged with mantras recited by learned Brahmins seated on the *mukhamandapam.* These are emptied on the deity, the golden pot - *Brahmakalasam* - being the last one. There are grand feasts at noon on all the ten days.

Sandhya Vela is another ritual specially conducted at Vaikom particularly during the 40 days preceding Ashtami. The main ceremony is recital of Vedas by learned Brahmins sitting on the *mandapam*. Then there are *siveli* or procession in the morning, of course a feast at noon and *vilakku (Laksha deepam)* at night.

Different parties like the rulers of Travancore and Cochin, various associations like the Brahmin *samooham* and neighbouring devaswoms like Ambalapuzha used to vie with one another in the past in celebrating *Sandhya Vela.* Now these have become symbolic and most of the rituals are conducted by the Devaswom itself under government control.

The administration of Vaikom temple was in the hands of 108 Nambudiris, called Uralars (literally, governing committee of the village.)

In course of time most of the families became extinct; there are only three or four families left now. The reason for the destruction of these families is that once in the *payasam* prepared for a big feast a dead snake was found. Some of the Nambudiris decided to remove the snake and serve the delicacy to the devotees. As a result many died of poison. The result was their own annihilation.

Story of Horses

Following this incident to prevent any bad effects or poisoning of food the *srikoil* which is kept closed during the feast is opened again and *ananda prasad* served to devotees as described earlier.

In days of yore the west side of Vaikom was bounded by the sea. Now the sea has receded and we have the backwaters of Vembanad. Ships used to call here, bringing horses from Arab countries. The Tamils from Pandya Desa came here to purchase the animals. The story goes that once the poet-saint of Tamil Nadu, Manikkavachakar, came here to purchase horses on behalf of a Pandya King. He made his purchases according to the prescribed *lakshanas* and had them tethered for the night in the courtyard of the temple. Next morning he found them all turned into dogs.

Obviously the Lord did not approve the idea of keeping the animals inside the temple without permission, Manikkavachakar, the great devotee that he was, worshipped the Lord and did penance the next day. He sprinkled the holy tirtha obtained from the Chief Priest and lo! The animals became horses again. The Pandya King hearing this made enormous gifts in gold to make amends.

The nightly vigil of the temple is kept by one Devata, called “Kavutayan”. His idol now is installed on a maidan outside the temple on the north-west side. Then there is the story of the famous Vaikom Pachu Moosad. He was a leper and got rid of his disease through austere bhajan which he observed day and night.

Three Aspects

The Lord Siva of Vaikom assumes three aspects during the day. In the morning upto *panthirati* pooja he is Dakshinamoorti - giver of divine wisdom to all sages and saints. He is the ultimate knowledge in human form - *jnana swaroopa.* Hence worshipping him at his time one obtains wisdom and intellect.

In the noon upto *uccha* pooja he is in the form of Kirata - hunter fighting with his greatest warrior devotee Arjuna to test him if he deserves the missile - the Pasupata astram. This is propitious for bathing the deity and those who want success in anything obtain it by worshipping him now.

In the evening the Lord is Satchidananda itself - the ultimate goal of every devotee, be he an ascetic or a householder. The Lord is immersed in bliss, *ananda,* in the embrace of his consort Parvati. Everybody can freely approach him at this time and obtain his blessings.

10. CHOTTANIKARA — WHERE THE POSSESSED ARE EXORCISED

They were married in September 1968 in the sacred Palni Hills. Their wedded bliss was, however, short lived. Trouble started seven months after marriage. The wife was afflicted with a mental disorder. She was believed to be possessed by evil spirits and treatment by specialists in Bombay and Madras was of no avail.

The couple became desperate. In this predicament an elderly neighbour advised: "Go to the Devi at Chottanikara in Kerala for refuge. All will be well."

The couple and their parents betook themselves to the shrine. There the *prasnam* (astrological investigation) revealed that the woman was possessed by five evil spirits. The priest's prescription: 14-day bhajan or worship at the temple. But the girl would not go anywhere near the shrine. She was somehow forced and made to sit before the sanctum.

With each puja the priest performed to drive away the different spirits she experienced some relief. One or two major spirits were however particularly troublesome. Offering of *guruthi* - a solution prepared out of turmeric and lime water - to Bhadrakali at the kizhkavu (literally shrine at the lower level) was the last resort.

This done, she was completely cured. The grateful couple returned home to live happily thereafter. They were also blessed with a son. All this they attribute to the grace of the Divine Mother of Chottanikara, who, for ages, has cured countless men and women - the haunted, the possessed and the mentally afflicted.

"Apati kim karaniyam?" - What is to be done in a calamity? Goes a celebrated question. *"Smaraniyam charanayugalama-mbayah"* - Think of the sacred feet of the Mother, was the equally celebrated answer. The temple at Chottanikara stands as a monument to proclaim aloud the truth of this saying.

Once, one Guptan Nambudiri of Kandarappalli *illam* near Chottanikara set out for Tripunithura, nearly 9 km. away, to witness a Kathakali

performance. In those days there were no pucca roads nor any vehicles. It was a pleasant moonlit night. The Nambudiri therefore had to trek all the way alone through the rugged path. He hummed to himself merrily some Kathakali tunes to relieve the solitude.

On the way he had a pleasant and sweet surprise. He saw a bewitching beauty standing before him and smiling to him coquettishly. The smell of jasmine wafted through the night air. The Nambudiri was tickled at being alone with such a damsel who dazzled him out of his wits.

It was the beautiful woman who broke the ice. She assured the bewildered Brahmin that she was none other than the well-known Ithuttu Varyasyar (Varrier woman). She was also bound for Tripunithura and was waiting there looking for a suitable companion. The Nambudiri, she thought, was indeed a god-send.

Thus they resumed their walk talking sweet nothings and exchanging amorous glances. Presently, they reached the gate of his guru's house - Kosapallimana. Guptan Nambudiri told her to wait there while he went inside and handed over a holy grantha which he was carrying with him.

The woman protested. How could he leave her alone on the road? Could he not return the book in the morning while returning from Tripunithura? But the Nambudiri insisted on returning it then and there as otherwise he would incur the wrath of his teacher. He went inside assuring her that he would not take long.

The Terrible Yakshi

Kosapalli Achan Nambudiri was reciting the Bhagavata after his dinner. Guptan Nambudiri gave the book and asked his leave since he was in a hurry and Ithuttu Varyasyar was waiting outside. The learned teacher, however, suspected something. He came out and saw the woman. He told his disciple to touch him and look at her. Lo! It was an apparition, a fiendish woman with fierce eyes and protruding teeth. Little did Guptan Nambudiri realise that he was in the clutches of a terrible yakshi out to entice men and devour them.

Achan Nambudiri advised him to run to Chottanikara Devi who alone could rescue him from the ogress. He chanted some mantras invoking the blessings of Bhadrakali. Giving Guptan a wet cloth he advised him to go inside the temple and throw the cloth behind. Accordingly Guptan ran, the yakshi closely following him. On reaching the temple he placed one foot inside and dropped the cloth behind, when all of a sudden the yakshi caught him by the other leg. He fell down entreating the goddess for protection.

Moved by compassion the Bhagawati rushed to the spot, sword in hand. The yakshi left hold of the victim and ran away. But the Mother caught her by the hair, cut her head and threw it in the southern tank. As a result the water became red like blood. This tank is therefore still called Rakthakulam (blood tank).

After the slaying of the yakshi the priest is said to have performed *abhisheka* and offered *malar* (puffed rice) *naivedya*. This custom still continues.

It is widely believed that this incident actually took place some two hundred years ago. There is, however, another version with a slight variation. According to this the Nambudiri was going to Triprayar for the Pooram festival when he met a beautiful woman walking alone in the night. At the temple, it was Kalloor Nambudiri, a great magician who met him and pointed out to him that he was in the company of a fiendish girl.

Then followed the same advice: to run to Chottanikara. He gave him some pebbles to be thrown behind his back till he reached the temple. The rest of the story is the same.

Unique Sight

Whatever the credibility of these stories, the fact remains that to this day one can witness the most unique sight at Chottanikara, that is, the possessed being exorcised in large numbers. This takes place at noon worship particularly on Fridays. The possessed offer prayers before the deity, their hearts throbbing with ecstasy. Amidst the beating of the drums and the chanting of *"Amme* (Divine Mother) and *Narayana"* they shriek and dance. Often a tussle ensues between the Devi and the evil spirits in which it is the latter which admit defeat and depart.

One can hear the altercation in different tones though it is uttered by one and the same afflicted person. It runs something like this: The spirit utters: "No, No, I will not go." But the Goddess insists: "Go you must."

Usually minor cases are disposed of at the nearby Sasta shrine. A nail is driven into one of the pillars in front and the exorcised spirit is thus bound preventing it from affecting others.

The more serious ones are dealt with by the Devi who directs the patient to the Bhadrakali at Kizhkavu. There the fierce goddess sees to it that the person is freed from the affliction when he or she falls unconscious. If necessary, *Guruthi* is also offered. One or more nails offered by the priest, depending on the severity of the case, is thrust into the *paala* tree on the north side of the shrine by the devotee with the fist and also hitting the head against it. One is indeed amazed by the countless number of nails driven into or plates fixed to the tree giving an indication of the vast number of people cured.

Guruthi, as already mentioned, is a solution prepared out of turmeric and lime water which looks like blood. It is a popular offering for Bhadrakali even by those who desire to achieve their cherished objects. On Tuesdays and Fridays the offerings are so many that one has to book in advance. Three vessels are the minimum number to be offered. After partaking of the liquid the devotees carry it home and bury it in the four corners of the house and inside to ward off evil spirits.

Charms

Another protective device is the wearing of charms filled with loose soil taken from the pedestal of the main deity. This is given to desiring devotees by the priest after offering puja. The wearer will be free from diseases and will enjoy prosperity.

The main deity at Chottanikara is worshipped as Rajarajeswari - as used to be sung by Semmangudi Sreenivasa lyer, the doyen of Carnatic music in his inimitable style, *'Pahimam Rajarajeswari, Kripakari, Sundari pahimam Sri Rajarajeswari"* (Oh! Goddess Rajarajeswari, the benevolent, the beautiful, please protect me ____")

The vigraha which faces east is of laterite, three or four feet high and is said to be self-born. It has no well-defined shape. It can be seen only in the morning when the nirmalyam (previous day's flowers, garlands etc.) is removed.

At other times, it is covered with a beautiful golden raiment about four or five feet high. This idol has four arms - the upper right holds the disc, the upper left bears the conch, the lower right hand is held in a boon-conferring pose and the lower left indicates the *abhaya* (fearlessness) pose. Indeed the golden-hued idol bedecked with flowers, garlands and jewels and bathed in myriad lights kept in front shines resplendently. It is a picturesque image bewitching everybody, an embodiment of peace, dispelling fear from devotees who bow before her.

The deity is worshipped in three different forms - as Saraswati in the morning clothed in an impeccable white garment, as Bhadrakali at noon with crimson red cloth and as Durga in the evening wearing a bright blue dress. It is because of these threefold aspects of Saraswati, Bhadrakali and Durga that she is worshipped as Rajarajeswari.

Alongside the Devi, to her right, is another image - Vishnu - in granite. This is about two feet high springing from the same pedestal. They together are called Lakshminarayana. Hence the popular chant of the devotees. *"Amme* (Mother) *Narayana," "Devi Narayana," "Lakshmi Narayana,"* etc.

A feature of the deity is that it is not fixed with *asthabandha* as is the case in most of the temples. Hence the area around the pedestal is full of loose sand. Because of this the water poured on the deity does not flow out through the pipe outside (generally fixed to the north) but percolates underground. It is believed the water flows underground and joins the tirtha of the Onakkur Bhagawati temple, one and half furlongs away.

On the north-east side of the main deity is the Dharma Sasta shrine. Here he is depicted not as Brahmachari as is generally the case but as a grihastha with his two wives, Purna and Pushkala. The vigraha of Sastha is also of granite, about half a foot high with golden covering. There is a legend about the advent of Sasta in the Chottanikara temple. Once Bhagawati went in procession to Meppazhur Mana for *para* (offering of a measure of paddy). On the way some rowdies harassed those accompanying the procession. Hence while returning the Meppazhur Nambudiri provided escort by sending his family deity, Dharma Sasta who, however, continued to stay at Chottanikara serving the goddess.

Outside the *nalambalam* in front of the shrine there is the usual flagstaff, altar *(balikallu), anapandal* (pandal for elephants) etc. On the south, somewhat in the middle, there is a platform called *pavizhamallithara* where the Devi is supposed to have made her first appearance. On the south-west there is a Siva shrine, Nagadevata and Yakshi - the same that followed the Kandarappalli Nambudiri as a beautiful woman.

Outside the main temple on the north-east there is a flight of stone-steps which leads to the famed Kizhkavu, the abode of Bhadrakali mentioned earlier. This is also a one-foot granite image facing west clothed in a raiment made of *panchaloha.* This is said to have been installed by Vilvamangalam Swamiyar who had retrieved it from inside the tank in front of the shrine. A landmark here which cannot be missed is of course the *paala* tree described earlier, with hundreds of nails driven into its trunk.

The Festivals

The annual festival of the temple comes in Kumbha (February-March). It lasts for nine days starting with flag-hoisting on Rohini asterism and ending on Uttram day. A special feature is the daily *arattu* during the festival, not on the last day as in other temples.

During the festival, darshan on the Makham day is very auspicious and attracts a vast concourse of pilgrims especially between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., the period considered most efficacious. Women pray for *mangalya* or married bliss and for the prosperity of their children. Others pray for achieving their desired objects. The deity specially decorated for the occasion with gold and diamonds shines in all its splendour. It is believed that the goddess gave darshan to Vilwamangalam Swamiyar on this day and appears in the same form to her innumerable devotees.

Origin

According to the *sthala purana* the place where the temple stands today was once a dense forest inhabited by tribals. Among them was a notorious dacoit by name Kannappan. He struck terror among people by his ruthless acts. One day he brought home a cow intent on slaughtering it for food. To his utter consternation it tore itself free and escaped into the jungle. He tried to trace it but failed.

He returned home disappointed when lo! He saw the same cow being caressed by his fond daughter who would not allow him to kill it. Subsequently she herself, who was his only child, died. Wisdom and enlightenment dawned upon Kannappan. He lost interest in things mundane and turned his thoughts towards god.

One day he had a dream in which Mother Sakti appeared before him and told him that the cow which brought about his transformation was herself. She also informed him that the cowshed would be sanctified by the presence of her idol and that of Vishnu. The next day Kannappan repaired the shed and found the idols. He built a temple and spent the rest of his life in the worship of the devi.

After the death of Kannappan the temple fell in ruins as the place became uninhabited. One day a Pulaya (outcaste) woman who had come to cut grass sharpened her scythe against a stone which started to ooze blood. The horror-stricken woman shrieked aloud and the Pulayas in the neighbourhood came running to the spot. They, in turn, informed the learned Edathu Nambudiri, who, visiting the spot, realised that there was divine *Chaitanya* of Parasakti at the place. He bought *malar* and offered pooja.

Some other Nambudiris gathered and a *prasnam* was held in which it was revealed that the stone be worshipped as Devi and the adjoining one as Vishnu and both together as Lakshmi Narayana. The spot where the goddess appeared first is the present *Pavizhamallithara* on the south side of the temple.

It was Edathu Nambudiri who built a shrine, performed pooja and administered the temple for several years. Later some trustees took over.

The celebrated Kakkasseri Bhattatiri who defeated the equally celebrated Uddanda Sastri in a wordy duel was one of the trustees. They appointed one Ayinakad Nambudiri of Kurumbranad in North Malabar as Manager. But he became so much engrossed in his devotion to the Bhagawati that he forgot even to maintain the accounts regularly. During the *mandalam* (November-December) when the trustees assembled to perform the customary *Eswara seva,* they, as usual, asked the manager to produce the accounts which he could not. They were naturally enraged and were contemplating action against the defaulter. But the Devi came to the rescue of the embarrassed Ayinakad. An unknown voice was heard: "I am satisfied with the devotion of Ayinakad more than his accounts." From this date Ayinakad himself became a trustee.

In course of time, he however became old and ill and eventually the Cochin Government took over the management of the temple in 1064 according to Malayalam era (A.D. 1888). The rulers of Cochin were great devotees of the Bhagawati. They brought about several improvements. The *nalambalam, srikoil, mandapam* etc. were renovated and their roof covered with copper plates. The golden flagstaff was also installed by them besides building *anapandal, bhajanapura* (shed for bhajan) etc.

Today the temple is under the administrative control of the Cochin Devaswom Board. It can easily be reached by bus from Ernakulam or Tripunithura. Thanks to the increasing faith in the healing power of Rajarajeswari, the temple is flourishing as a popular pilgrim centre in Kerala, next only to Guruvayur.

11. KALADI-THE BIRTHPLACE OF ADI SANKARA

This writer had the unique opportunity of visiting Kaladi in May 1965 when the Sankaracharyas of three maths - Sringeri, Dwaraka and Puri met here to participate in the Sankara Jayanti celebrations. It was unique because rarely do Sankaracharyas of different maths meet together. Such a meeting in which all the four Sankaracharyas including that of Badrinath came together on a common platform took place 15 years later - May 1979 - at Sringeri which, it was said, was the first meeting in 125 years. The Kaladi

meeting was therefore an event of importance and all Kerala and the neighbouring States enthusiastically welcomed the holy men.

Kaladi is “a pre-eminent centre for inspiration on the banks of the Purna River that purified every man in thought, word and deed,” said the Sankaracharyas in a joint message:

“A visit to Kaladi increases tranquility, self-restraint and other eminent virtues of those engaged in the pursuit of knowledge. It is the duty of every common man to visit the holy Kaladi, the birthplace of Adi Sankara, and more so any aspirant for liberation, the Sanyasi and those that follow the Advaita school of thought.”

Yes, everyone should visit Kaladi not only to renew their faith in Advaita Vedanta, the dominant philosophic school of Hinduism but also to wonder how a Brahmin born in this small obscure village came, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, “to look upon the whole of India from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas as his field of action and left such an impress of his powerful mind and rich personality on India that is very evident today.”

A Good Son

Sankara was born in A.D. 788 of a devout Nambudiri couple - Sivaguru and Aryamba. They were disconsolate because they had no issue. They repaired to the famous Siva (Vadakkunnathan) temple at Trichur and worshipped the Lord with all their heart. The Lord appeared before them in a dream and wanted to know their desire. The couple prayed for a son. The Lord asked: "Do you want a short-lived good son or a simpleton with a long life?" They chose the former and returned home to live a life of devotion and dedication.

In due course a child was born to them. It was a precocious child. Unfortunately Sivaguru died when the child was only three. Aryamba brought him up with love and care. At the age of five he was invested with the sacred thread and sent to the teacher's house for education. In three years' time the boy mastered all the subjects of study and returned home.

He also served his aged mother in all possible ways. Once his mother swooned on her way to the river Periyar (also called Purna) which was some distance away. Sankara nursed her back to health and prayed to the Lord that the river might change its course to enable his mother to take her daily bath in it. The river did change its course.

Yet another miracle occurred. One day while Sankara was taking his bath in the river he was caught by the leg by a crocodile. The mother heard his cries and ran to the river only to see his beloved son being dragged to the river. She stood in horror. At this crucial moment the son said to his mother that there was only one way of release from the jaws of the monster and that was she should allow him to enter the sanyasa ashram. The helpless mother had no alternative but to agree. And the crocodile let him go.

Before taking leave of her, Sankara assured her that he would be with her in her last days and would perform the funeral rites which he did.

Spiritual Enlightnment

The study of the scriptures had convinced Sankara that spiritual enlightenment was the highest goal of life. The crocodile episode may be interpreted as Sankara's horror of a worldly life and his importunities to his mother to give permission for a life of renunciation. In any case as per his innate inclination to dedicate his life to spiritual pursuits Sankara set out in search of a preceptor.

He met his guru, Govinda, on the banks of the Narmada River. Under him he mastered yoga, Vedanta and other systems and became a knower of the Brahman. The guru was immensely pleased with his disciple and bade him go to Kashi next and write the commentaries for various scriptures and re-establish the Eternal religion.

Sankara obeyed his master and on the way worshipped at several temples, teaching scriptures to earnest students. His erudition and exposition attracted many scholars as also disciples. The first sanyasin disciple of Sankara was Sanandana who later came to be known as Padmapada.

Verses of Wisdom

At Kashi, one day Sankara had a strange experience. He was going to the Ganges for his bath when an outcaste came from the opposite direction with four dogs and obstructed the way. Sankara ordered him out of his path. The outcaste retorted: “Whom are you asking to get away, the body or the soul? The soul is pure and omnipresent. Is there any difference in the reflection of the moon seen in the Ganges or in a wine cup. As for the body, it is inert; can it move away?” Sankara was taken aback.

He realised that the outcaste was none other than the Lord of Kashi and fell prostrate at his feet. He broke forth into an Advaitic hymn which has become famous as the *Manishapanchaka* - Five Verses of Human Wisdom - and which has this refrain: “The man who sees the same self in all beings and leads his life accordingly, he is my guru, be he an outcaste or a high-caste Brahmin.”

Sankara’s next destination was Badari in the Himalayas. Badari being the place of penance of Vyasa, Sankara chose to stay there and write the commentary on the Brahmasutras, on ten Upanishads, on the Gita, the Vishnu-Sahasranama, etc. Thus he completed the commentaries on the three main basic authorities of Hindusim viz. the Upanishads, the Brahmasutra and the Gita. The remaining years of his life he spent in preaching and teaching Vedanta. He visited all the famous seats of learning and pilgrimage throughout India. At Kashmir he ascended the Sarvajnana pitha, the seat of omniscience, defeating all the *pandits* there in discussion. He established four maths in four corners of India - at Sringeri, Badari, Dwaraka and Puri - and trained eminent disciples to carry on the message of Vedanta.

Unparalleled in History

When Sankara knew that his mother was on her death-bed he rushed to her by the power of his yoga. Seeing that her last moments had come, he sang a hymn to Lord Vishnu. The Lord appeared before his mother and she entered eternal beatitude.

After performing the last rites for his mother, Sankara again resumed his spiritual mission. He is believed to have reached Kedar in the Himalayas and disappeared at the age of 32, after giving final instructions and benediction to his beloved disciples.

This in brief is the outline of a great and eventful life "And" in the words of Swami Ranganathananda "a sustained struggle of a lifetime brings to India a measure of unity, harmony, and order in religion, thought and culture which is a record unparalleled in the history of man."

What we see at Kaladi today stands to the sacred memory of that venerated saint, indeed an avatar of Sri Sankara, His Holiness Sri Narasimha Bharati Swamigal, the 33rd Acharya of Sringeri Sarada Peetham. It was he who realised in a vision early in this century the place in Kaladi where the remains of Aryamba were cremated. The idols of Adi Sankara and Goddess Saradamba, the guardian deity of Sringeri, were also installed by him. In between these shrines is the Aryamba samadhi. To the west there is the Sri Krishna temple of Sri Sankara's ancestral home and a Ganapati shrine.

Yeoman Service

His successor Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati Swamigal continued the good work done by his predecessor and constructed a beautiful bathing ghat and embankments, agraharams, pathasalas and other ancillary institutions. Further the Sankara Memorial Trust has been doing yeoman service by promoting educational, literary and cultural activities to perpetuate the memory of Adi Sankara.

The credit also goes to Swami Agamananda of the Ramakrishna Mission who did excellent work to make known to the public at large the importance of Kaladi. He travelled throughout the length and breadth of the country preaching to the masses the message of the Upanishads as expounded by the great Sankaracharya.

The Shri Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama at Kaladi, whose main objects are dissemination of spiritual ideas and the service of God in man, has also built a beautiful temple of Sri Ramakrishna more or less on the model of the Sri Ramakrishna temple at Belur Mutt. It is a magnificent temple built in neatly dressed granite. The statue of Ramakrishna in finely chiselled marble is a masterpiece of workmanship. Indeed this shrine along with other temples and institutions in memory of Adi Sankara has made Kaladi an internationally known place.

12. A TEMPLE FOR KANNAKI

In our boyhood days, in Malayalam month of Meenam, (March-April) we saw groups of men - and occasionally a sprinkling of women - passing through our village on their way to Kodungallur to participate in the famous Bharani festival. The men, often drunk, sang obscene songs and slogans. They laughed, danced and swayed their bodies as they simulated the sexual act in the most blatant manner.

Even the Goddess Kali, the presiding deity of Kodungallur, was not spared. Her sexual organs were subjected to the most elaborate and intricate descriptions. It is believed that the Goddess likes such description.

We children to whom sex was a hush-hush affair became curious and were naturally amused by these strange sexual exhibitions. We wondered how the pilgrims who observed *vrata* or abstention for days together before the festival and were on their way to offer prayers before the Goddess could indulge in such obnoxious things.

To this day no satisfactory explanation is offered regarding the rationale of this strange and controversial custom. It is just contended that eroticism has always been a part of Hindu religion, its literature and sculpture and that is all there is to it.

Another ritual which we as children heard with horror was the large-scale sacrifice of cocks in this temple during the

Bharani festival. It is said that the heads of the cocks were severed by a sharp knife and blood split on two stones. The practice is now mercifully stopped but for these reasons the awe and wonder in which we held this unique temple never ceased.

And it is with the same awe that we viewed the life-size idol of Bhagawati when we visited the temple years later. Both fierce and benign aspects of Sakti appear to be intermingled in the idol. With her eight hands carrying deadly weapons like the sword she strikes terror at first. But one is irresistibly drawn towards her as one contemplates her benign aspects, her eyes being full of compassion and her form exuding love, kindness and protection.

Kodungallur (also called Cranganore) is 40 km. south-west of Trichur in central Kerala. Situated at the Kutungal or junction of the river and the sea, it is almost an island bounded by the Arabian Sea in the west, by the river mouths of Chetvai and Azhikode on the north and south respectively and by backwaters in the east. It is a picturesque place with plenty of flora consisting of coconuts, arecanuts and fruit trees like jack-fruit, mango, etc., and a vast expanse of shimmering waters forming the backdrop.

Historical Place

The Kali temple, one of the most famous on the west coast, is situated about the middle of the island on a sprawling maidan of about seven to ten acres.

Kodungallur is of great historical importance having been the seat of the Chera Empire, one of the three powers which ruled South India in the beginning of the Christian era. It was at that time a great seaport and was visited by Romans, Greeks, Chinese and traders from West Asia.

The Greeks called the place Musiris which was also known as Tiruvanchikulam, now a suburb of Kodungallur and famous for its Siva shrine.

The imperial Cheras were noted for their devotion. Imaiyavarampan, one of the earliest kings who reigned for fifty-eight years, filled the land with temples and shrines. His younger brother Palyanai who succeeded him worshipped the Vedic gods. The most celebrated among the Chera Kings was Senkuttuvan who prayed to Siva and Vishnu and above all deified Kannaki as Kodungallur Amma or the guardian mother of Kodungallur and of the empire of which it was the capital.

Many of these ancient shrines are in ruins today, thanks to the depredations of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. But the Bhagawati temple continues to remain the most permanent memorial to Senkuttuvan's 55-year reign. The consecration of the temple is described by his elder brother, Ilango Adikal, in the celebrated Tamil epic, *Silappadikaram,* composed by him.

The theme of *Silappadikaram* is well known. At the time of the story, South India was divided into three kingdoms, Chola, Pandya and Chera. The incidents connected with this great romance start in the Chola Empire, continue in the Pandyan kingdom and end in the Chera Empire.

At Pukar, the capital of the Chola Empire, there were two merchants. The beautiful daughter of one - Kannaki - and the handsome son of the other - Kovalan - got married. At the same time, there was a young and beautiful dancer, named Madhavi. Kovalan somehow fell for her and he lived with her forgetting his own wife. Kannaki, for a while.

In due course they were, however, estranged. Kovalan returned to his faithful wife, Kannaki. But he was penniless, having lost all his riches during his life with Madhavi.

All the same Kannaki welcomed her beloved husband and offered him one of her golden anklets for sale. They decided to proceed to Madura, the Pandyan capital and start life anew.

There Kovalan entered the goldsmith street and offered the anklet to the goldsmith attached to the royal household. It so happened that this particular goldsmith had stolen the anklet of the Pandyan queen and he thought he had a good opportunity to cover his guilt.

Accordingly he informed the King who without enquiring further ordered the execution of Kovalan and the seizure of the anklet. As Kovalan lay dead in a Madura street, Kannaki, fuming with anger and holding the other anklet in her hand, went to the King and accused him of murdering her innocent husband.

Consecration of Kannaki

To prove this she broke open her other anklet and lo! Its precious stones spilled out sparkling. The Pandyan King was shocked as the queen's anklet contained pearls and he fell dead.

Kannaki went out to the streets, tore off her left breast in fury and cursed the city of Madura which started burning immediately.

Then Kannaki left Madura and the Pandyan Kingdom and came to Chenkunnu in Kerala. There she became a sati by burning herself and joined Kovalan in the celestial region. The reigning Chera King of the time, Senkuttuvan, deeming Kannaki to be an incarnation of Kali, decided to erect a memorial to her.

He went North, defeating and seizing kings who opposed him and brought a stone from the Himalayas to be set up as her image. It was consecrated with great pomp and ceremony in the presence of numerous kings and chiefs, including Gajabahu of Ceylon.

This, in short, is the story of *Silappadikaram* and the consecration of Kannaki at Kodungallur. However, certain features of the structure of the Kodungallur temple point to the fact that, originally, it was a Siva shrine and that the image of Kali was installed later. The idol of Siva faces east and that of Kali north. The *mandapam,* the platform for devotees to sit and worship the main deity, which is an important characteristic of Kerala temple architecture, is also located before the Siva shrine. In fact there is no such *mandapam* for Kali at all. It is also the practice to offer pooja and *naivedyam* first to Siva and then to the Devi.

All this leads us to persume that in the early epochs, there was only Siva, just a Sivalinga, as in the period of the Indus Valley Civilization, we have no idea as to how old this Sivalinga is.

Majestic Idol

The earliest mention of Kurambakavu, by which name also Kodungallur temple is known, is in the 14th century Sanskrit work, *Kokasandesa*. The following lines translated by Shri V. T. Induchudan and quoted in his book, *The Secret Chamber,* almost describes the present image of Kali in the temple.

Thou should go and behold
Sri Kurambakavu standing.

In the midst of flowers filled with
honey and black beatles
Hovering over them
There preside Mahakali
The flame of whose tongue
Ploughs through the sea
They worship Kali as tall as the sky
The beautiful white canines protruding
Who drinketh on ocean of blood
of asuras cut down like tender coconuts.
Of blood shed from the bodies
of asuras killed by her
I worship thee, Oh Mother!
who roaring and laughing aloud.
And surrounded by her company of goblins
Tortured the asuras with Khatwangas.

The majestic idol of Kali is about six feet high and is made of wood. It is said to have been carved out of the trunk of a jack-fruit tree. It is fully decked with gold ornaments, a *kirita* (crown) like the one used by actors in Kathakali and a mask. It has eight arms which carry various weapons and symbols some of which are difficult to identify. All the parts except the hands are covered by golden raiment. Around the neck are worn ornaments like *addhika* (necklace) and *pavan mala,* chain woven of gold discs. Below the waist of the idol, which is in a sitting posture, is worn a crimson cloth. The image glittering in the numerous lights placed before it is indeed eye-filling and awe-inspring.

The idol we see is that of Kali after the killing of asura or demon named Daruka. According to the legend the asuras and devas fought each other. In the battle the asuras were almost exterminated except for two of their ladies named Danamati and Darumati. They worshipped Brahma to have offspring. Brahma advised them to go to Kaliasa, marry Mania Rudra and beget children. They did as advised by Brahma and in due course Danamati and Darumati conceived and gave birth to two boys named Karaka and Daruka. Darumati advised her son Daruka to worship Brahma for granting him power to fight the Devas.

Brahma appeared before him and assured him that he would not be killed by man, stone or iron or by weapons during night or day. Pleased with the boons Daruka turned to go when Brahma called him and reminded him that he had not attained invincibility against women. At this Daruka laughed and said he required no special power to fight the weaker sex.

Slaying of Daruka

Daruka began to challenge the very gods. The situation thus became serious and the gods conferred together to meet the menace that was Daruka. They created six Goddesses, called Brahmani, Vaishnavi, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Varahi and Indrani, the respective names being inherited from the Gods who created them - Brahma, Vishnu, Mahadeva, Subrahmanya, Yama and Indra.

The six Goddesses fought Daruka but were defeated. At this moment Siva created from his third eye the Goddess Kali and sent her to kill Daruka, fully arming her with all kinds of weapons. Kali easily killed Daruka and was going back to Siva still shivering with fury. Siva became afraid of her temper and created two kids to suck her breasts. This did not pacify her fully. Siva then danced before her which finally became a naked trance when she bowed her head.

The legend of slaying of Daruka is peculiar to Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Elsewhere it is the demon Mahishasura whom Durga killed. When Kamsa tried to kill the daughter of Yasoda presuming that she was born to Devaki the girl escaped from his hand and flew towards the sky, giving a warning that a boy had already been born to kill him. She was none other than Durga, also called Kali or Mahakali. In the course of the Mahabharata war, on the advice of Krishna, Arjuna prays to Durga for easy victory. Here she is called Kumari, Kapali, Kapila, Bhadrakali and Chandi.

As there are different idols, their descriptions also differ from text to text - some say Durga has four arms, some sixteen and so on. One of the local songs describe the Goddess of Kodungallur as the Kali of Kurambakavu which name has stuck. Even here we do not have a detailed description of her form. It is casually mentioned that she carried a sword in her right arm and a Kapala in her left.

In the hall adjoining the sanctum of Kali on its west side are seven images known as Saptamatrukas or Seven Mothers. They represent the six Goddesses whom the Gods created as described above to kill Daruka and Chamundi. The images, each with four arms, are in the sitting posture facing north. There are three doors to the hall through which they can be seen.

Secret Chamber

To the east of the Kali image there is a small chamber with no doors or windows nor any other opening over ground. It has no entrance and is covered on all sides with granite though there is a roof above. It is, therefore, called the secret chamber. There is however an underground passage from this room eastward, which opens to overground about hundred yards away in the temple courtyard. The mouth of this passage is shut at ground level and an enclosure has been erected around it. The elephant procession during the festival turns back when it reaches the spot without completing the circle to avoid damage to the passage.

No one has attempted to probe into the mysteries of the chamber as it is fraught with dreadful results. A carpenter who was once repairing the roof could not resist his curiosity to peep inside. He is said to have lost his eyesight.

The western wall of the secret chamber, against which a crimson cloth is hung, is held sacred. Lamps are lit and regular rituals are held. However only certain privileged persons like the members of the family of the local chief visiting this temple can view this cloth and worship. This can be done only through the western door of the sanctum of Kali which is opened only on such rare occasions.

The presence of the mysterious chamber is worth, investigating. It is presumed to be a megalith which literally means a big stone but technically used by anthropologists and archaeologists to denote stone - structures or monuments in which our ancients placed the material remains of the dead - and in this case these may be of Kannaki. (Readers may refer to *Secret Chamber* by Shri V. T. Induchudan published by the Cochin Devaswom Board. Trichur for an elaboration of the theme).

The next important deity is Kshetrapala, which literally means the guard of the square. It, therefore, stands outside in the courtyard on the north-east side in the position of guarding the temple. The image in stone, twelve feet high, is said to be a rare feature in Devi temple. There are various legends on the origin of this deity.

One relates to the two children whom Siva created to suck the breasts of Kali when she returned to Kailasa in hysterics after killing Daruka. The one who sucked her right breast was called Virabhadra and the other who sucked the left one was called Kshetrapala. According to another legend Siva created Kshetrapala along with others to organise the army of Kali when she went to fight Daruka.

On the south-west is another subsidiary deity called Vasurimala. She was the cause of all contagious diseases like small-pox. The Kodungallur Bhagawati is believed to have subdued her and installed her at the place with the injunction that she should never trouble her devotees. Sprinkling of turmeric powder is the offering for this deity. *Guruthi* - the red fluid made out of mixing turmeric with lime - is also offered here.

The Two Festivals

Talappoli and Bharani are the two main festivals conducted in the temple every year. The former is a colourful pageant, full of merriment, with mainly the local people participating while the Bharani festival is purely devotional and ritualistic, yet attracting pilgrims from all over Kerala.

Talappoli starts on Makara Sankranti - the first of Makaram (December-January) and lasts 4 days. It is a harvest festival coinciding with Pongal celebrated in Tamil Nadu and certain parts of South India. As done elsewhere, here also on the day previous to Makara Sankranti, rubbish and other unwanted materials are collected and burnt. Houses and courtyards are cleaned. The temple premises are decorated and a large fair set up. A part of the rice from the freshly harvested paddy is set apart as offering to the Goddess.

On Makara Sankranti the people belonging to the community of Kudumis (Konkani-speaking people, their main occupation being making of *pappads*) from and around Kodungallur gather here in large numbers with their offerings. Then a big fireworks display takes place which mark the inauguration of the festival. From the next day onwards, for four successive days, there are elephant processions both in the morning and in the evening.

The procession starts from a small shrine dedicated to Kurumbayamma (supposed to be the original seat of Kodungallur Devi) about half a kilometre away. A feature of the procession is an array of the gaily dressed women carrying *talam* (trays), with coconuts and rice accompanying it. Another is the central elephant carrying a kolam - a flat plate with a small umbrella instead of *thidampu*, a miniature of the idol used in procession in other temples.

The procession with the usual paraphemalia - silk umbrellas, *alavattom* and *chamaram* - held aloft on the back of the elephant and accompanied by beat of drums and other musical instruments is a gorgeous sight. As it reaches the eastern side of the temple *ethirelpu* or reception is held to the Goddess by the Chieftain of Kodungallur and priests of the temple with the cries of ‘Amma’: (Oh mother!) rending the air.

The month-long Bharani festival opens on the Bharani asterism of the month of Kumbham (February- March) when the temple flag is hoisted. It lasts for seven days after the next Baharani in Meenam (March - April). The temple is widely known more for this festival than anything else. It is the one temple in Kerala where non-caste Hindus were allowed entry during the festival long before the temple entry legislation became effective in Kerala.

Indeed, the festival opens with the symbolic ceremonial *kavu teendal* or polluting the temple by a goldsmith of polluting caste going round the temple three times ringing a bell at about 7 in the morning. After a few minutes the eldest family member of the Pilappilly House attached to the temple announces that the temple has been swept clean. Thereafter the Nambudiri priest enters the sanctum and conducts the usual services.

The flow of pilgrims from other parts of Kerala commences some days before the Bharani day in Meenam. The sacrifice of cocks is held on Avittam or Chatayam day i.e. six or seven days before Bharani. From these days the temple is regarded as polluted. As mentioned earlier the heads of cocks are severed by a sharp knife and blood spilt on the two stones in the courtyard. It is on account of this ceremony (which is now stopped) the Bharani festival came to be known as the Cock Festival.

The privilege of commencing the Cock Festival traditionally belonged to a Nair from Kodungallur Bhagawati Veedu (House). On Aswati day previous to Bharani offerings are made to the Goddess by throwing into the inner precincts of the temple small packages of turmeric, pepper and other articles with some coins, coconut and a live cock.

On this day the ordinary services of the temple are closed at 10 a.m. At 12 noon, the Atikal, a non-Brahmin priest, enters the sanctum and performs the service of *trichchandanapoti chartal* or smearing of the idol with holy sandal powder. This is done with the door shut and lasts till half past three. The doors of the sanctum are then opened for darshan.

After the service the pilgrims are ordered out of the temple. Then the *Valia* or Senior Raja of Kodungallur stands on the platform of the peepal tree in front of the eastern portico and spreads a green umbrella. The crowd till then kept back rushes to the temple and circumambulates in a frenzied and wild manner and then retire.

Early next morning i.e. on the Baharani day around 3 a.m. the Atikal again goes to the temple and makes offering of payasam or sweet pudding. At 6 a.m. again cocks are sacrificed (now, of course, symbolic) and various offerings like turmeric, pepper, coconut, live cock etc. are thrown into the quandrangle.

On Karthika day, i.e. the day after Bharani, the premises of the temple are swept clean. The Nambudiri priests enter the temple and start the usual services after performing purificatory rites. The hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who gather for the festival disperse quietly taking prasad like sandal paste mixed with turmeric, and *chantu,* black paint of burnt rice.

The timing of the Bharani festival is noteworthy, March-April-May are the hottest months in Kerala which are also critical for agriculturists. The fields are ploughed several times after the preceding crops are cut in December-January. The farmers look skywards for merciful rains. The Bharani festival which takes place now is obviously to please the Gods for good rains and bountiful crops.

13. A TEMPLE FOR BHARATA

The story of Bharata in the Ramayana portraying a character of unrivalled purity and sublime selflessness is something more than an episode, and stands out by itself even in that noble epic, as holy shrines do on the banks of the Ganga. It uplifts the heart, and gives one glimpses of the heights to which human nature can rise when cleansed by love and devotion.

"Jnana and bhakti will automatically grow by contemplation of the personality of Bharata," so writes Rajaji about Bharata in his *Ramayana*.

The Vaishnava hymns exalt Bharata even above Rama for his devotion and unsurpassed unselfishness. He installed Rama's *padukas* and ruled the kingdom as Rama's deputy for fourteen years. At the same time he stayed at Nandigrama near Ayodhya and did his penance even as Rama did his penance in the forests.

And when Rama, reunited with Sita, was returning to Ayodhya, Bharata's penance too was at an end and his heart was filled with joy. In fact, his joy was deeper than what Kaikeyi and her bunchback maid had planned for him. Indeed, what kingly crown could equal the joy one found at Rama's feet? What sovereignty could bring the glory that was now Bharata's forever?

It is this Bharata anxiously and devotedly awaiting the return of Rama from exile that is conceived as the deity of the Kutalmanikyam temple at Irinjalakuda. The attitude is that of a much-relieved and happy Bharata just learning from Hanuman that Rama with his friends, the Vaanara warriors and Vibhishna were already on their way to Ayodhya.

Kutalmanikyam is probably the only temple dedicated to Bharata in the whole of India. It is believed that Hanuman is even today present in the temple kitchen. Even huge vessels in which *naivedyams* are cooked can be lifted by one person, the belief being that Hanuman gives a helping hand from the other side. Incidentally, there is no *upadevata* in this temple, not even Vighneswara usually found in almost all temples.

Origin

Coming back to the *pratishta* of Bharata, according to legend, a local chieftain, Vakkey Kaimal had a dream one night in which some mysterious persons appeared before him and told him that four idols had been washed ashore in the nearby sea and each of them was to be consecrated at the allotted places. The Kaimal, an ardent devotee of the Lord, hastened to the seashore early in the morning and found the idols lying there.

The idols were that of Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Satrughna. They were duly installed in four temples as directed in the dream: Rama at Triprayar, Bharata at Kutalmanikyam (Irinjalakuda), Lakshmana at Moozhikulam and Satrughna at Payammel. All the four idols are images of Vishnu though they are imagined and worshipped by different names. Worship at all the four temples on the same day is considered specially meritorious.

Long before the installation of Bharata, the place had something divinely unique about it. The entire area was a dense forest inhabited by a community of rishis headed by Kulipini Maharshi. They were engaged in incessant yagas to please Mahavishnu. The Lord, pleased by their penance and devotion, appeared before them and desired to know their wish. All they wanted was His presence at the place. The Bhagawan readily agreed.

The place was probably not inhabited for several hundred years. And when people came to live here the divine *chaitanya* materialised in the form of Bharata as narrated in the legend above.

The Holy Kulipini Tirtham

The rishis also prayed to Devi Ganga to bless their land with her presence. Thus the river Ganges also inundated the area and the rishis bathed in the holy waters and attained moksha. It is said the springs of the Ganges are still there in the Kulipini tirtham on the northern side of the temple.

Incidentally, the tank abounds in fish which are held sacred. Feeding the fish *(Meenuttu)* is a ritual and believed to be of special merit. No one is permitted to bathe in this tank except the archakas.

How did the idol of Bharata come to be known as Kutalmanikyam or Sangameswara by which names He is popularly known? According to folk-tale, one day the idol was seen to give out an extremely luminous light from its forehead. In order to identify the source of brightness, someone brought a quartz *(Manikyam)* which was in the possession of the Raja of Kayamkulam for comparison. And lo! When the ruby was brought near the idol it merged with it. Because of the lustre of the two rubies joined together the deity came to be known as Kutalmanikyam, or rubies joined together.

The Lord of Sangama

It is also called Sangameswara or the Lord of the Sangama because Irinjalakuda in olden days is said to have been situated at the confluence or Sangam of two rivers. The rivers have now changed course. Still the *arattu* festival of the temple is held on the banks of the Chalakkudi River one year and the Kurumali River in the next year thereby indicating the previous connection of the deity with these rivers.

According to another legend, one saintly person belonging to Taliparamba was on a strange mission to visit all great temples in Kerala with a view to transfer the *chaitanya* of the gods to the temple in his village. When he came to Irinjalakuda for the same purpose, the conch shell in which he had transferred the divinities accidentally fell from his hand and broke into pieces, instantly the assembly of divinities of all the idols merged with the deity at Irinjalakuda giving it the name of Sangameswara. In fact, the priest offers worship in the name of Siva, Vishnu and Devi to the same idol of Sangameswara, giving credence to the story.

Irinjalakuda town is 8 km. from Irinjalakuda railway station on the Trichur - Ernakulam line of the Southern Railway. A road from the bus stand leads you directly to the massive eastern gateway. It is an impressive structure embedded with numerous carvings.

Artistic Excellence

Entering inside, on either side of the walls there are beautiful murals. As you turn to the left there is the well-known *kuttambalam.* The entire northern side is covered by the temple tank — Kulipini tirtham.

The *srikoil* is circular in shape with copper-plated roof and a golden *tazhikakudam* at the pinnacle. The wood carvings and granite friezes on the outerwalls are of high artistic excellence.

It is a majestic Vishnu image with four arms - the left upper holds the discus, the left lower, the conch, the right upper has a *gada* and lower one, a *japa mala,* rosary. Standing before the splendourous image one recalls the beautiful lines of the famous poet Unnayi Warrier who for long served the Lord as His Chief garland-maker:

I bow to Sangamesa who has the gada, the conchshell, the discus and the rosary in His hands, to Him Who is the god of gods, whose figure shines with the effulgence of ruby, who vouches moksha to his devotees.

Distinctive Features

There are certain distinctive features about Kutalmanikyam temple. Firstly, as already mentioned, there is a single *pratishta* here, that of Bharata, there being no other *upadevatas.* Secondly, the flower offerings consist of only lotuses, *tulasi* and *chetti*; no other flowers are used for worship. Third, the temple-tank — Kulipini tirtham - contains plenty of fish which are held sacred, but no such creatures like water-snakes, frogs, etc., commonly found in most tanks. The water is said to have curative properties.

Lastly, there are only three pujas conducted here daily against the five normally performed in all great temples. These are the *Etirthu* puja, *Uccha* (noon) puja and *Athazha* (night) puja, the omission being *Usha* (early morning) puja, and *Panthirati* which follows *Etirthu* puja. And there is no *siveli* or procession daily; the deity being taken out in ceremonial procession only during the annual festival.

Offering of Brinjals

Vazhutananga naivedyam (offering of Brinjals) is one of the peculiar *vazhivadus* in the temple. It has been experienced by many that partaking of this *naivedyam* and a few days of bhajan cure stomach ailments. There is a legend behind this. One aged devotee was suffering from stomach-ache which could not be cured even after expert treatment by several doctors. In his agony he resorted to Kutalmanikyam temple to observe bhajan. One night he had a dream in which the Lord appeared before him and advised him to pluck 101 brinjals from his garden and offer the same to Him. This was done and after partaking of the *naivedyam* he was completely cured. Since then brinjals came to be regarded as a special item of offering to the deity.

Mukkidi

Triputtiri on the Thiruvonam day in the month of Thulam (October-November) is an important occasion when the newly-harvested rice is cooked and first offered to the Lord. Then a great feast follows. The next day there is a special offering called *Mukkidi* which is considered a miraculous cure for all stomach ailments. *Mukkidi* is an Ayurvedic mixture the formula of which is known only to the Kuttancheri Moose, one of the families of *ashta vaidyas.*

In olden days the ingredients of *Mukkidi* used to be obtained in the precincts of the temple itself. A particular spot was sprinkled with cowdung solution and covered by a big vessel. Next morning when the vessel was lifted there would be fresh sprouts of some medicinal plants which were collected and used for the preparation. The story goes that one year someone who was impatient lifted the vessel out of curiosity and he lost his eyesight. Since then the ingredients could not be got by this process.

The annual festival of the temple is held for 11 days from Uthram to Thiruvonam asterisms in Medom (April-May), the flag-hoisting ceremony being conducted on the Uthram day. The *utsavam* offers a pageant of colour, music, fine arts and elephant procession to the thousands who throng to witness the event.

The administration of the temple traditionally vested jointly in the Maharajas of Travancore and Cochin and a representative of the local community. It was the Maharaja of Travancore who held supremacy in the setup though the temple was situated in Cochin State. The representative of the Maharaja of Travancore, Tachudaya Kaimal, was the chief executive of the temple administration. With the abolition of the princely order, the Government of Kerala appointed a new Managing Committee with the Tachudaya Kaimal as Chairman to look after the day-to-day administration of the temple.

14. SRI RAMA TEMPLE AT TRIPRAYAR

In the previous chapter we read about the four idols of Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Satrughna being washed ashore and secured by Vakkey Kaimal who had them installed at Triprayar, Kutalmanikyam (Irinjalakuda) Moozhikulam and Payammel respectively.

When Kaimal was consulting astrologers and pundits about the installation of Rama's idol at Triprayar, an unknown voice was heard to the effect that a peacock would fly high above in the sky and the idol be installed at the spot exactly below.

Accordingly preparations for the *pratishta* began. The auspicious day and time arrived. But there was no sign of the peacock anywhere. The people were puzzled and stood looking skyward. Presently a devotee holding a bunch of peacock feathers appeared on the scene. Taking it for the peacock itself, the *pratishta* was performed immediately.

Later on, it is said, the bird did appear as predicted and below that spot the *balikkal* or altar was installed. Because of this, the *balikkal* is said to have the same importance as the deity itself.

For several years the *balikkal* kept moving round and round. One day Naranathu Bhranthan (literally Narayan, the mad saint) who was a yogi with Siddhis or miraculous powers came to worship at the temple. He was surprised to see the movement of the stone. Through his yogic powers he understood the reason. He called the temple Tantri and had a nail driven on the *balikkal,* chanting mantras. The movement stopped forthwith. The portion where the nail was thrust can be seen even today.

In order to prevent any decline in the power of the idol on account of the change in its location Naranathu Bhranthan also arranged to install two goddesses on either side of the deity — Sri Devi on the right and Bhumi Devi on the left.

It is also believed that it was the great Vilwamangalam Swamiyar who installed Sri Devi and Bhumi Devi in the sanctum. Once when he came to have darshan of the Lord he saw a wonderful sight. That was Sri Devi and Bhumi Devi entering the temple from the western gateway to offer prayers to the Lord. In order to set right the fault in location of the idol, the Swamiji

installed Sri Devi and Bhumi Devi on either side. He then closed the western doors and left the temple. This probably is the reason why the western entrance is still kept closed.

Vishnu Image

The idol is a four-armed one like all Vishnu images with *sankha and chakra* in the left hands and *kodanda* (bow) and a *mala* or garland in the right hands.

Though the deity is in the Vishnu form, in the *srikoil* itself there is an image of Dakshinamoorti facing south, which is commonly found in Siva temples. There is also a lamp behind the image which is kept burning all the time. Because of these and also because of the fact that people get relief when troubled by evil spirits — *chathan* — the deity is believed to have a Siva aspect also.

It was after killing the asura, Khara that Sri Rama got both the Saiva and Vaishnava aspects. Thus some pandits are of the opinion that the *pratishta* here is that of Rama after killing Khara.

Some believe that the *mala* which the image holds in one of the left hands indicates the aspect of Brahma. Thus the deity is said to have the aspects of Trimurti, *i.e.* Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

Outside the *srikoil* there is an image of Ganapati. In the *mandapa* opposite the sanctum sanctorum, Hanuman is believed to be present though there is no image as such. Devotees generally bow before the *mandapa* imagining the presence of Hanuman there before worshipping Sri Rama. Firing of *kadinas* which is an important offering here is to commenmorate the return of Hanuman after the search of Sita, with the words, *"Drishta Sita"*- seen Sita.

It is said that once the image of Rama was found slightly turned to one side. As the Kalasam cannot be performed without straightening the position, Kanippayur Nambudiri and others went inside the sanctum to set right the image. In the process they covered the image with a new cloth. Suddenly it turned itself and assumed the original straight position.

Tipu Sultan did not spare Triprayar Thevar also. To test the divinity of the idol he struck at one of the hands. Blood started oozing. He repented his action and developed faith and devotion to the god. To make amends he donated to the temple some of the landed property he had annexed.

The original idol of Rama was subject to severe wear with the passage of time. Astrological investigations however revealed that the Lord did not desire to have change of the vigraha. Therefore a raiment was made in *panchaloha* and the same now covers the original stone image.

It is a beautiful image, the face beaming with a sweet smile, the neck radiant with the Koustubha ornament, the chest charming with the Srivatsa mark and the body shining with necklaces, shoulder bracelets and bangles and garlands. Indeed one cannot take one's eyes off easily and those who had darshan once would want to come again and again. The temple itself, situated close to the river and amidst gracefully swaying palms and various other trees, has a unique charm that is captivating.

Attractive Temple

Architecturally, the temple is one of the most attractive in Kerala possessing a certain amount of antiquity and ancient wood carvings. The central shrine is circular in shape with a conical roof and is surmounted by a *stupi.* The *namaskara mandapa* which is copper-plated is profusely sculptured–having 24 panels of wood carvings representing navagrahas. Its walls are decorated with mural paintings of a bygone age.

Episodes from the Ramayana which are sculptured on the *srikoil* have a subtle grace and exquisite beauty blended with imperishable charms. “They have,” as Shri Poduval describes, “a dynamic and lively vitality of design and form, a lavish decoration and an integral part of the architectural edifice of the temple.”

Outside the temple in the southern side of the courtyard there is an Ayyapa (Sasta) shrine. It is believed that this deity was originally at the place where the present Rama idol is installed. With the arrival of Sri Rama, Ayyappa moved to the south in the present location in the same way Edathedathu Kavu Bhagawati at Guruvayur moved to the north side on arrival of Sri Krishna. In fact, it is believed that in olden days Kerala had only three kinds of shrines or *kavus,* that is for Ayyappa, Naga and Bhagawati. It was with the advent of the Nambudiris that these *kavus* were converted into temples dedicated to Rama, Krishna, Siva etc. At Triprayar the original temples of Ayyappa appears to have been converted into the Rama temple.

Kuttu Offering

Kuttu is an inportant vazhivadu or offering at this temple. Now, *Kuttu,* which is mono-acting, can either be a discourse *(prabhandha)* or a pantomime *(abhinaya).* At Triprayar the latter is presented. Formerly, *prabhandha kuttu* used to be performed. According to legend, to stage *kuttu* there should be at least one Brahmin present in the audience. Once there was no Brahmin at all available and the Chakiyar, the performer of *kuttu,* did not know how to proceed. He stood perplexed, not knowing what to do.

Suddenly a voice came from the sanctum saying that *kuttu* was presented not for Brahmins but "for me." "Therefore perform *kuttu* in my presencce." Since then *kuttu* which was being staged in the specially erected *kuttambalam* on the south-east corner of the temple started being staged in the *mandapa* itself inside the temple. And only *angya kuttu* (pantomime) is performed and the sanctum remains open throughout the performance.

From Vrischikam 1 (mid-November) *kuttu* is presented for 12 days by the temple management itself. The subject enacted is *Anguliyangam* in the Ramayana, that is, Hanuman taking the ring from Sita after finding her in Lanka and taking it back to Sri Rama. The major part of the performance is devoted to a conversation between Hanuman and Sita.

There are five pujas conducted here as in all great temples-*usha* (early morning), following this, *etirthu puja, pantirati* (about 10 a.m.), *uccha* (noon) puja and *athazha* (night) puja. There are also *sivelis* three times when the deity is taken in procession around the temple. *Nirmalya* darshan (early morning when the sanctum opens for the day) and *athazha* puja are considered very sacred. For *athazha* puja especially devas and asuras are supposed to be present to have darshan of the Lord.

Festivals

Ekadasi in Vrischikam (November-December) and pooram in Meenam (March-April) are the two annual festivals conducted in the temple. Ekadasi celebrations start on Dasami day itself when Ayyappa is taken in procession. This shows the importance of Ayyappa whose temple it was before the installation of Sri Rama. On Ekadasi day, Sri Rama is taken in procession with as many as 21 elephants participating. It is an occasion for devotion and pageantry attracting thousands from far and near.

The seven-day pooram festival begins on the Makiram asterism in Meenam (March-April) and ends on the pooram asterism. There is no flag-hoisting ceremony here – in fact there is no flag-staff itself – to herald the annual *utsavam.* The festival is part of the famous Arattupuzha pooram festival in which over a hundred elephants took part until a generation ago. Now with the change of times, the number of elephants has come down. But there is no diminution in the rituals or in the pageantry.

Every day for seven days the procession starts from Triprayar for a certain place where the *arattu* (bathing ceremony) is held, giving opportunity to thousands outside Triprayar to offer worship to the deity.

Triprayar temple is situated in what is called Chettuva Island which was formerly under the Zamorins. In 1719 it was annexed by the Dutch. Then the Mysore Sultan defeated the Dutch and annexed the territory. Then came the British who defeated the Mysore Sultan. The Cochin Rajas claimed it as their own. The British gave them the temple. Now it is under the administrative control of the Cochin Devaswom Board.

15. THE VADAKKUNNATHAN TEMPLE

No visitor to Trichur can miss the Vadakkunnathan temple “one of the most unique, ancient and important” of the sacred shrines of Kerala. It stands on a beautiful hillock at the centre of Trichur overlooking the town. The vast maidan around the temple is called Tekkinkadu or forest of teak woods and Trichur town literally revolves round the temple. Now, of course, there is no forest here.

The name Trichur is derived from Tiru-Siva-Perur. The holy place was also Vrishachala, *vrisha,* meaning Nandikeswara.

The massive stone wall enclosing an area of nearly 9 acres and forming a strong fortification and the four lofty gopurams overtopping the central shrine and indicating the four directions - North, South, East and West - and above all the dozens of peepal trees scattered on the vast grounds of the temple gives Vadakkunnathan temple a unique and magnificent appearance.

In the centre of this vast enclosure on a level ground is a multi-shrine complex having three principal shrines dedicated to Siva or Vadakkunnathan, Sankaranarayana and Rama. The Vadakkunnathan is on the northern side, a circular structure, the deity facing west. The figure of Siva-Parvati is facing east and just back to Siva, situated in the same shrine. At the southern end is located the two-storeyed shrine of Sri Rama also facing west. Between these two *srikoils* stands a third one, circular and double-storeyed in shape, dedicated to Sankaranarayana and it also faces west. This shrine has beautiful murals of the seventeenth century delineating graphically the story of Mahabharata. There are *mukhamandapams* in front of all the three central shrines.

Legend

There is a legend behind the three main deities which are believed to have been installed by Parasurama. The story goes that first he prayed to Siva that he should manifest Himself there. But when he opened his eyes what he saw was the image of the four-armed Mahavishnu with the conch, the disc, the mace and the lotus. This is now worshipped as Rama. (In fact in Kerala almost all important Krishna temples including the famous Guruvayur temple whether worshipped as Rama or Krishna have the image of Mahavishnu in the form of Viswaroopa in which the lord appeared before Devaki and Vasudeva at the time of His birth.)

Not satisfied with the manifestation of Mahavishnu, Parasurama continued his meditation. This time a small Sivalinga materialised to the north of Vishnu deity. Parasurama was surprised to see Siva on one side and Rama on the other side. He again went into meditation. Opening his eyes he saw in the middle of the two deities, Sankaranarayana, the combined form of Siva and Vishnu or Narayana. He was now satisfied and realised that Siva and Vishnu are in fact one and the same - *Ekam sat viprah bahudhah vadanti* - “The reality is one. The wise call it by different names”.

Thus we have three main shrines in the temple, dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Sankaranarayana. Behind Siva, the goddess, Parvati was also installed by Parsurama. The image is of wood and hence no *abhisheka* is performed for this deity. All other idols are of stone except that of Vadakkunnathan which is a mound of ghee. This is again a unique feature of the temple.

Ghee Mound

Traditionally the *abhisheka* to Parameswara here is always with cow's ghee. Because of this constant *abhisheka* the ghee will be seen to form a mound as it were. The Maha-linga cannot be seen because it is covered with ghee. The mound is nearly 10 feet around the original linga and there is hardly space for the priest to go around in the small sanctum. That in spite of so many lamps burning in the sanctum or even in hot weather the ghee does not melt nor any worm or bad smell occurs in the accumulated ghee is a matter for wonder.

In the Ayurveda, old ghee is prescribed as cure for many diseases. Only at Trichur temple there is ghee which is as old as a thousand years. Hence, the Vaidyas in Kerala are known to approach this temple for old ghee.

While ghee is the *abhisheka* for Siva, oil is offered for Rama and *panchagavya* for Sankaranarayana.

Between the Vadakkunnathan and Sankaranarayana shrines, there is a small edifice facing east in which the image of Ganapati is installed. Appam, sweetened oil cake, is another famous offering here made for this deity.

There is one more idol, of Vettakkorumakan, supposed to be the guardian of the temple at the northern *nalambalam*. These are all the deities installed in the inner precincts of the temple.

Outside, at a distance from the temple, all round, is the *pradakshina vazhi* (circumambulatory path) which has a uniform width of seven feet. A few minor deities or *upadevatas* stand along this path.

As you enter the temple from the main entrance - the western gopuram - there is a stone called 'Kali'. A little to the north is the shrine of Gopalakrishna. The surroundings of the temple is the resting place for many cows, the favourite animal of Krishna. In front of the temple is the famous *kuttambalam* described later. A little beyond on the north side, there is a niche for the Rishabha or bull, Lord Siva's mount. One has to clap his hands here before worshipping the deity, as it appears to be always sleeping and to wake it up, a noise has to be made.

Then comes a *thara* or platform in the north-east corner in which Parasurama himself is supposed to reside. In Kerala, there are several deities which were installed by Parasurama though there is hardly any shrine for Parasurama himself (with the exception of Parasurama temple at Tiruvallam near Trivandrum). Hence this shrine in the precincts of Vadakkunnathan temple is unique.

Beyond this, on the east side behind the *nalambalam,* there is a shrine for Simhodaran. After praying at this shrine devotees take a few steps towards the *nalambalam* where there is a small triangular opening on the wall. Through this the *thazhikakudams* or finials of the three main shrines can be seen. This darshan, it is claimed, is equal to seeing several holy temples of India like Kashi, Rameswaram, etc.

Further coming around the circumambulatory path at the south-west corner one sees Dharma Sasta installed in a small temple. This is apsidal in shape, a unique style adopted in Kerala. A little beyond them is a rectangular enclosure of stone walls without roofing in which there is a *Sankha* and *Chakra* commemorating Adi Sankaracharya. This completes our round of the temple and all the *upadevatas*.

Associated with Adi Sankara

The presence of the *Sankha* and *Chakra* in the precincts of the temple are signs of association of Adi Sankaracharya (788-820 A.D.) and indicates how ancient the temple is. According to legend the parents of Adi Sankara came to Trichur and observed bhajan for 41 days and as a result Vadakkunnathan was born to them as Sankara. Adi Sankara himself, after his earthly mission, is said to have shed his mortal body here. Apart from establishing Mutts in different corners of India he is said to have founded four Mutts at Trichur itself viz. Vadakke Matham, Natuvil Matham, Edayil Matham and Tekke Matham. All this strengthens the belief that Vadakkunnathan temple was famous even before the 9th century.

According to Shri A. Sreedhara Menon, author of *A Survey of Kerala History*, the Vadakkunnathan temple and the Karumba Bhagawati temple at Kodungallur were at one time Buddhist shrines. He also mentions about the three inscriptions found in the temple, which have been roughly assigned to 12th century A.D.

He writes: “Their historical value lies in the fact that they mention the Kattuvayiraveli Kacham which testifies to the ascendancy of the Nambudiri Brahmins who framed regulations in regard to the rights of the tenants, menials etc. who were subordinate to the Vadakkunnathan temple. This is the only Kacham or agreement which contains provisions for controlling the rights of the tenants in Kerala.”

Just outside the western gopuram there is peepal tree with a paved platform, which is called “Sreemoolasthanam.” It is believed it was at this spot that Parasurama, after consecrating the deities of the temple, met the Nambudiri Brahmins, the traditional priests of Kerala temples, and handed over charge of the temple to them and disappeared.

There is an interesting story told in this connection. Before disappearing himself Parasurama had told the Nambudiri Brahmins that if they met with any serious difficulty they could observe a certain ritualistic fasts and invoke his presence and he would come to their aid. Several years passed. Once the Nambudiris thought that they should conduct a test to see if Parasurama would appear again before them. Accordingly they observed the prescribed fast. And Parsurama did appear to their surprise. When he

enquired about their trouble the Nambudiris had to confess that they invoked him only as a test. At this, the sage got angry. Saying that he would never again appear before them he disappeared for ever.

Imposing Kuttambalam

A striking feature of the temple is *kuttambalam* which one sees on the left side as one enters the temple through the western gopuram. This is the theatre hall for staging *kuttu,* an ancient dramatic form of art famous in Kerala. There are *kuttambalams* in several temples in Kerala but there are few structures which are as large and as beautiful as the one at Trichur. It is a marvel of structural workmanship with sloping roofs of carefully enmeshed copper plates, austere, dignified and aloof. With the three finials shining at the top this 'playhouse for Gods and Goddesses, for the worshippers and the worshipped' has an imposing appearance.

There is an interesting story about its construction which was planned by "Vellanazhi" Nambudiri known for his skill and knowledge of Thachu Sastra (architecture). There was an old dilapidated structure at the same place where the present *kuttambalam* stands where Vellanazhi was ordered to build a new structure by the then Diwan Sankunni Varrier. All he did was to go to the temple with his carpenter and pray to the Lord for a while. He then went inside the old structure, spread a cloth and lay on it for an hour. Then he came out and ordered the carpenter to demolish the old structure and start building a new one. The perplexed carpenter asked where was the *"puram Kuttu"* or sketch? The Nambudiri replied that he had already made *'Akam Kuttu'* (mental sketch) and asked him to go ahead as he ordered. The final result was the beautiful structure which we see today.

The Highness was very much pleased with the skill of the Nambudiri. He wanted to test his skill on another occasion. He asked him to reconstruct the outer wall of the temple and wanted to know the exact number of bricks that would be required. The Nambudiri thought for a while and gave a number. The king had warned him that he would take him to task if the number was found less or more.

Then he asked one of his trusted men to get the exact number asked for but hide two bricks somewhere. When the wall was completed finally, two bricks were still required. The king asked the Nambudiri's explanation. Undaunted he told him that his man has either brought two bricks less or hidden them elsewhere. The pleased king presented him with a golden bracelet. Such was the skill of the architect.

Sacred Bull

There is another amusing story about the origin of the white rishabha or bull at the main entrance to the *nalambalam* from the west. Once a young and strikingly handsome saint came to the temple. He sat on the *mandapam* in front of the sanctum and meditated for hours together. He disappeared the moment the temple was closed and appeared again when the same was reopened. He was so attractive that many people especially women who came to worship stood and stared at him. After a few months the children born to several women in this place resembled the saint. The men became angry at this and wanted to drive him away.

The saint understood this. So he brought skilled artisans from Tamil Nadu and had a beautiful bull made and installed it at the entrance to the temple. Now several cows grazing in the temple yard came near the bull and stood as though admiring the beauty of the bull. The newly born calves also had resemblance to this bull. It was then that the people realised that on whichever object pregnant women concentrated during their pregnancy the child would resemble that object.

Sivaratri Festival

There are no annual *utsavams* or other celebrations here except Sivaratri. And the Lord never comes out of his abode. Even during the Sivaratri celebration, which is the most important ceremony of this temple, the diety is not taken out in procession. During the famous Pooram festival celebrated annually in Medam (April-May), Lord Vadakkunnathan is but a mere spectator granting the premises and convenience for the festival. No offering is received or any expenditure is incurred by this temple in connection with the Pooram festival. Not even any special pooja is offered on the occasion though the Thekkinkadu maidan is the venue of the festival.

The administration of the temple now rests with the Assistant Commissioner under the Cochin Devaswom Board. Originally after the consecration of the various deities, Parasurama brought a Brahmin family from a place on the bank of the Krishna River. The head of this family called 'Yogathiri' looked after the temple. Later the ruler of the erstwhile Cochin State took over the administration. The Kerala Land Reforms Bill has affected this temple also, the quantity of *Naivedyam* having to be drastically cut in recent years. It is, however, encouraging that the temple is attracting more and more visitors daily and the cash offerings from the devotees are also going up correspondingly.

The temple opens at three in the morning and closes about 10.30 a. m. after the morning rites. For the evening worship it opens at four and closes at 8.30 p. m. at night after *'Trippuka',* the last rite for the day. It is a pleasing feature of the times and this temple especially that hundreds of men and women flock to the temple for darshan from the early hours of the morning after taking their bath at all seasons of the year.

It is noteworthy that the Vadakkunnathan temple has been declared a national monument by the Union Government under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act.

16. THE LORD OF GURUVAYUR

Sri Krishna took birth in the city of Mathura, on the banks of the Yamuna, probably three thousand years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The purpose of his avatara or descent to earth was to destroy adharma and to reveal to the world the spelndour of God. He is called the Purnavatara of Vishnu, that is, the full manifestation of the Lord Supreme, as contrasted with the other incarnations who were only partial revelations of the Godhead.

Even as a boy, He performed many miraculous deeds that testified to His being God incarnate on the earth. The destruction of the demoness Putana, the revelation of His cosmic form, Viswarupa, as He opened His mouth to His foster-mother, Yasoda, the lifting up of the mountain Govardhana, the overcoming of Kaliya, the serpent, who fouled the waters of the Yamuna, the devouring of the forest conflagration and, to crown it all, His amorous dalliance with the Gopis are some of the wondrous acts of His early boyhood - acts that indicated how He combined human and divine traits.

In later years, He proved Himself a dauntless warrior, an unsurpassed statesman and a world teacher. He slew Kamsa and many other wicked demons. As Arjuna’s charioteer he took a leading part in the great battle of Kurukshetra where He delivered His eternal message of the Bhagavad Gita. He proved His statesmanship by acting as peacemaker between the Kauravas and the Pandavas and by founding the city of Dwaraka and being its wise ruler. Lastly, as spiritual guide and preceptor, He taught the supreme truths of Yoga, Bhakti and Jnana to Arjuna and Uddhava and through them to all mankind.

Bhooloka Vaikuntha

What happened to the Lord when He departed after fulfilling the purpose of His avatara? That beauteous form with all the auspicious marks in which He manifested Himself in flesh and blood to the people of His time is preserved for all time in the sanctified idols of our temples. Among the more famous of these shrines is Guruvayur, known as "Bhooloka Vaikuntha" where the Lord reveals Himself to His devotees in the same majestic form in which He welcomes them in Vaikuntha, His celestial abode.

The glory of Guruvayur was revealed by the Sage Dattatreya to King Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit who became a victim of leprosy following a sarpa yajna or snake sacrifice he performed to avenge his father's death brought about by the deadly Takshaka, Naga chieftain. Janamejaya obtained no relief from medicines. Ultimately He was advised by sage Dattatreya to worship the image of Sri Krishna at Guruvayur, Janamejaya did so with single-minded devotion and penance for four months. And cured he was of the festering and disfiguring sores of the body.

According to Sage Dattatreya, the image at Guruvayur was originally worshipped by Brahma. Brahma gifted it to Vishnu. Krishna, as the incarnation of Vishnu, brought the idol also along with him to Dwaraka. When the time came for His *swargarohanam* or ascent to Heaven, the Lord asked his foremost disciple and devotee, Uddhava to retrieve the idol from the impending submergence of Dwaraka in the sea and install it at a spot equally holy so that He could shower His blessings on His devotees and save them from the evil effects of Kaliyuga.

Uddhava entrusted the job to Guru, the preceptor of the gods, and Vayu, the god of winds. They took possession of the idol and moved in search of a proper place. Ultimately they decided to install it near a lake full of lotuses, on one side of which there were Siva and Parvati. That is Guruvayur, the place (*ur*) having derived its name from Guru and Vayu who jointly installed the vigraha.

Dwaraka of the South

The glory of Guruvayur - the place has also come to be justly known as the Dwaraka of the South - thus rests on the divinity of the idol installed there which represents the full manifestation of the Lord Mahavishnu as was revealed to Vasudeva and Devaki at the time of Krishnavatara; it is that attractive, world-enchanting form of Sri Krishna endowed with the four lustrous arms carrying the conch, the discus, the mace and the lotus.

Adorning Himself with the divine *tulsi* garland and pearl necklace, the Lord here appears in all radiance. His eyes stream forth the milk of compassion and kindness. To millions, Guruvayurappan or the Lord of Guruvayur is a living deity who answers their prayers. He is Sri Krishna, the divine cowherd who played his flute in Gokulam and Vrindavana and enchanted the whole world with his music. It is not only the gopis or milkmaids who yearn for oneness with Him, but all men and women who wish to be liberated from *samsara*.

Indeed, nowhere else do you see bhakti demonstrated more feelingly than at Guruvayur. As the Lord said to Arjuna in the Gita: “I am responsible for the welfare of those who think of me to the exclusion of all else and who remain devoted to me all the time,” Guruvayurappan comes to the rescue of his Bhaktas in distress and manifests His grace in infinite and inscrutable ways. His glory has thus spread far and wide and like Tirupati, Guruvayur is fast developing into a pilgrim centre of all - India fame.

Narayaniyam - The Gospel of Guruvayur

There are several *mahatmyas* (literally, works describing the greatness or importance of a place or deity etc.,) legends and folk-tales extolling the glory of the Lord of Guruvayur. The *Narayaniyam,* which may be described as the Gospel of Guruvayur and which identified Guruvayurappan with Mahavishnu, the central figure of the Bhagavata, is the greatest of these *mahatmyas,* creating a Guruvayur in the heart of everyone who reads or listens to it. To hundreds of thousands of devotees who come here on pilgrimage all round the year the very name *Narayaniyam* is a source of spiritual sustenance.

The author of this great work is Meppattur Narayana Bhattatiri, one of the foremost Sanskrit poets and savants of Kerala. He was striken with acute rheumatism. He tried every remedy known to man but in vain. At last he went to the Lord of Guruvayur, the Divine Healer for relief. There he composed his magnum opus of more than thousand slokas in praise of the Lord and recited them before the deity.

Almost every one of the hundred *dasakas* (sets of ten verses) ends with a prayer to the Lord of Guruvayur to cure the poet's malady. And cured he was by the Grace of Guruvayurappan. With this the glory of Guruvayurappan - and also of Bhattatiri - spread far and wide.

Narayaniyam contains the essence of Bhagavata. Though apparently its aim is the cure of the ills of the present birth, its hidden ultimate aim, like that of Bhagavata, is *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Thus the poet closes the last dasaka praying to the Lord to bless him and likewise all those who recite this hymn with *"ayur-arogya-saukhyam",* longevity, health and happiness here (in this world and now) and final deliverance thereafter.

Divine Healer

Like Bhattatiri who had vision of the Lord when he exclaims *"Agre Pasyami"* - Him I see before me, in the last *dasaka,* there were three other saints who were foremost in spreading the glory of Guruvayur. They were: Poontanam, Vilwamangalam and Kururamma. Poontanam was not as erudite as Bhattatiri but he was the embodiment of devotion, pure and simple; he was a saint of the masses and his appeal was to the heart. His *Jnanappana* or Song of Wisdom is one of the most moving works of poetry, simple and profound at the same time.

Vilwamangalam and Kururamma who were cousins were two blessed souls who had visions of the Lord. Vilwamangalam, considered as Guruvayurappan's greatest favourite, could see him wherever and in whatever form he wished. So also to childless Kururamma, the Lord served as her son. She lived with Him, played with Him and even scolded Him when He became naughty. The boy in turn helped her in all household chores as a dutiful son would for her mother.

In modern times, the well-known saint and scholar, Upanyasa Chakravarti, the late Sengalipuram Anantharama Dikshitar was cured of his leprosy by praying to Guruvayurappan. The late Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar lost his voice suddenly at the peak of a concert he was giving at Suchindram. Several doctors tried to cure him but to no avail. In despair he resorted to Guruvayur and wrung out his heart to the Lord. He regained his voice and lived many more years to regale packed audiences with his inimitable concerts.

Varied Offerings

There are countless incidents like these which should lift the hearts of the sick, the depressed and the helpless. Indeed devotees come in thousands to Guruvayur. The favours they seek of the Lord are different - cure of boldly ills, mental peace, progeny, success in vocations and examinations and, above all, salvation. They stay for a day or two and worship. There are those who go to Guruvayur for Tinkal or monthly bhajan or the 41-day bhajan in fulfilment of a vow or just to propitiate the Lord. Their offerings too vary from a small *archana* (offering of flowers) costing a few paise to the elaborate *udayastamana* pooja (literally from dawn to dusk) consisting of 21 special poojas and nearly costs lakh.

One of the most popular offerings is *Thulabharam* - a ceremony in which the devotee is weighed against bananas, sugar, jaggery, coconuts etc., the article weighed being gifted to the temple. The *Annaprasanam*, first feeding ceremony of the child and marriages are conducted here on a mass scale.

Elaborate Rites

Peculiar to Guruvayur is the elaborate system of rites established by Adi Sankara. The sanctum opens at three in the morning and closes at nine in the night. Except between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. when it is closed, a series of poojas, rites and processions are conducted. The darshan at three in the morning is specially auspicious. It is called *nirmalaya* darshan, the Lord still adorned with the flowers and garlands of the previous day and thousands flock to the temple at this early hour chanting 'Narayana', 'Narayana'.

Here is how Kulapati Munshiji described the scene at Guruvayur in one of his letters in *Bhavan's Journal*:

"One could hear nothing but the chanting of the name of the Lord from the innermost recesses of the heart of the devotees. As I went round the prakaras, I could see no idlers and gossip-mongers. Groups of persons went round the different minor shrines in a business-like manner. A couple of men were reciting *Narayaniyam*. At the portico I could see devotees fulfilling their vows with coconuts, plantain etc. On one side, young couples were giving their children the first official food - *Annaprasana*. At another, many people, young and old, were lining up for fulfilment of *Thulabharam* vows. What a faith!"

17. A TEMPLE FOR RAMA AND LAKSHMANA

E. M. Forster in his celebrated *A Passage to India* wrote: "India is the country-fields, then hills, jungles, hills and more fields". I was reminded of this while travelling from Palghat to Tiruvilwamala by an early morning bus. Unlike the coconut belt of Kerala which abounds in lagoons and coconut palms, the landscape this side of the State is dominated by hills, paddy fields and palmyra trees.

Tiruvilwamala is an important temple, consisting of two shrines side by side – one dedicated to Rama and the other to his brother Lakshmana. It is a mountain shrine easily accessible by road on the west side. The eastern side consists of a series of mountains which one has to trek to reach the temple. The place is in Thalapalli Taluk in Trichur District. It is 29 km. from Trichur and 20 km. from Palghat and is well served by frequent bus services.

To the north of Tiruvilwamala, about one km away, is the famous Bharata River (Bharatapuzha), the Ganges of Kerala, which adds to the scenic beauty of the place. On the other side of the river is Lakkidi Railway station on the Olavakot — Shornur section of the Southern railway. Killikurissimangalam, the birthplace of the famous Malayalam poet, Kunchan Nambiar, is near here.

It is a typical country place, calm, quiet and serene. Standing atop the hill and surveying the picturesque landscape of the place, caressed by a soft breeze, one finds oneself perfectly at peace with himself and the world.

The temple was among the richest in Kerala with one lakh paras of paddy as income from its lands, but to-day, thanks to the land reforms of the Kerala Government, like several other temples in the State, Tiruvilwamala also struggles for survival. The temple is at present administered by the Cochin Devaswom Board.

One prominent feature of Kerala temples, that is the flagstaff, which beckons you from afar, is absent here. So also the temple towers of which only the bases remain on the west and eastern gateways. Its beautiful carvings indicate how ornate the gopurams were. They had seven storeys and were so tall that the lamps lit there could be seen from the platform of

the peepal tree at Tirunavayi Navamukundan temple which is some 40 km. away.

The popular belief is that darshan of both Tirunavayi and Tiruvilwamala on one and the same day is very auspicious. Since seeing the light of temple even from a distance is equal to seeing the deity, lights in the towers were prohibited. It was ordained by the Lord that the real Bhakta should come physically to Tiruvilwamala and pray rather than adopt the short-cut of viewing the lights from Tirunavayi.

The story goes that once the temple priests sleeping on the top storey of the gopuram lighted a lamp and some of them went to Tirunavayi to see if the lights could be really seen from there. They did see the lamp and they showed it to others as well. The very next day the gopuram was struck by lightning and thunder and was razed to the ground. They have not been rebuilt since.

Huge Peepal Tree

Another striking feature is the huge peepal tree in front of the shrine on the east. It is a rocky place, the rocks extending right upto the *srikoil* inside. No soil is visible around, yet the peepal has grown majestically with its roots spreading all over the place. The tree stands as though welcoming the visitors.

A little to the south of the eastern gateway is the Hanuman shrine. It is a magnificent 5-foot stone image covered with silver raiment. Devotees first worship this guardian deity before entering the temple chanting:

Yatra yatra Raghunathakeertanam
Tatra tatra Kritamastakaanjalim
Bhashpavari Paripoornalochanam
Maarutim namata raakshasaantakam

(When ever the glories of Sri Rama, the Chief of the Raghu race, are sung, there is present Sri Hanuman, the son of Vayu and destroyer of demons, with his joined palms held over his head in salutation to Sri Rama and his eyes filled with tears of devotion. Bow before that Hanuman.)

Yet another feature peculiar to this temple is the presence of two equally big and square-shaped *srikoils*-one facing east, with the deity imagined and worshipped as Lakshmana, and the other facing west, dedicated to Sri Rama, though both the idols are that of Mahavishnu, with four arms carrying the conch, the disc, the mace and the lotus.

A striking example of distinct architectural charm, both sanctums are set a little apart from each other though they are to be circumambulated together, not separately. They are similar in style, quadrangular in shape with rubble basement. The roof is in two storeys, the lower one of truncated pyramidal shape and the upper one pyramidal with a golden *stupi* and four gabled roofs projecting externally from the top roof. In both the shrines the roof is covered with copper sheet.

According to legend, the eastern idol is the earlier one and was installed by Parasurama himself. It is a stone image about three feet in height. When decorated with gold ornaments, flower garlands and diamond diadem the

little image shines and is beautiful to behold. *Sri Vilwadri Mahatmya,* a Sanskrit text with 18 chapters, describes the origin of this ancient temple. It is in the form of a conversation between Uma (Parvati) and Maheswara (Siva).

According to this, Bhargava Rama, as Parasurama is called, prayed to Siva for the liberation of his *pitrus*. Pleased with the prayers of Parasurama, Parameswara granted him the image of Vishnu which He Himself was worshipping. Parasurama, in his search for a suitable place for the installation of the deity, came across the beautiful Vilwadri, full of Amala trees. He constructed a temple here, consecrated the deity and laid down the pooja routine. He brought the *pirtus* and got them liberated as a result of the darshan of the divine deity. The place he settled down finally is still known as Bhutan mala.

Self-born image

The image in the sanctum facing west is Swayambhu or self-born. It is four to five feet tall and is permanently fitted with a gold plated cover for the protection of the image and hence never removed.

Once a priest while trying to remove the coverings damaged the idol slightly. Thereafter it was decided to fit it permanently. The cover is in two portions — one up to the waist and the other above — both so dextrously joined together as not to be visible as separate ones.

It is said that there used to be a hole on the pedestal in front of the deity. The water filled here was served as tirtha. Once a piece of *kadali* plantain fell into this. The priest tried to remove this by piercing the hole with a sharp instrument. He heard a cracking sound of the stone and the tool fell from his hands. The tirtha also dried up subsequently.

It is believed that below the sanctum there is a cave and also a golden Vilwa tree. Some say, it is because of this that the place came to be called Vilwamala.

According to another legend when the power of the Vishnu deity increased enormously the asuras feared their end would come soon. To prevent this one asura assumed the guise of a Brahmin and came to the temple. He mixed freely with other Brahmins and participated in the temple feast with them. At night he would haunt the temple, would kill the cows and other animals and eat their flesh. He threw the bones and horns at one place which became a heap. This is still called *muri kunnu (muri* means ox and *kunnu* means hill.) This aroused the suspicion of other people who were frightened beyond their wits. They prayed to God.

One dark night in the month of Kumbha when everyone was fast asleep the asura broke open the sanctum and tried to destroy the idol. Then Mahavishnu assumed the form of Narasimha — half-man and half-lion — and tore him to death. Hearing the asura's wailings people came but were also frightened by the fierce form of the God. At this juncture Vilwamangalathu Swamiyar appeared and he praised the Lord with stotras, addressing him as Vilwadrinatha. The Bhagawan calmed and assumed his

benign form. People were overjoyed and started addressing him as Vilwadrinatha after the sage.

Rigorous Tapas

The story of the origin of the Swayambhu deity in the west *nada* is also related in the *Vilwadri Mahatmya* referred to earlier. According to this, Aamalakan, the son of Kashyapa Prajapati, started a rigorous tapas to propitiate Mahavishnu. Indra thought his objective was to conquer Swarga. He, therefore, deputed the celestial beauties — Urvasi, Rambha and Tilottama — to interrupt his tapas. But they failed in this.

Therefore he approached Kashyapa himself who explained to Indra that Aamalakan had no ambition nor was he interested in things transient. He was only interested in attaining unstinted devotion to God. Indra felt happy and left.

But the asuras became panicky. They thought this severe penance would bring about their ruin. They decided to end it by adopting various means, by creating terror in Aamalakan. But the latter opened his eyes which emitted sparks of fire which ultimately turned into a huge fire. The asuras became breathless and died on the spot. The heap of the dead was transformed into rock which is even now known as *rakshasapaara (paara* meaning rock) to the south east of the present temple.

Sage Aamalakan continued his prayer. Pleased by his perseverence, the four-armed Mahavishnu adorned with conch, etc., accompanied by Lakshmi and Bhudevi with Adisesha as his canopy, appeared before him. The sage shed tears of joy and bowed before Bhagawan.

Mahavishnu asked his devotee to name any boon. Aamalakan said that he desired nothing in this world, not even heaven. What he wanted was *achanchala* bhakti, unstinted devotion. He also requested the Lord to remain there for the protection of those who suffer in this *samsara.* Mahavishnu agreed and transferred his image to the deity.

Thus both vigrahas facing east and west are of Mahavishnu. Aamalaka Maharshi used to chant Rama’s names while doing tapas on the west side. Hence people praying here also uttered Rama nama and worshipped the deity as Sri Rama. Consequently the idol on the east side came to be regarded as Lakshmana, Rama’s brother and life-breath.

Foremost among Rama temples

Among the three famous temples dedicated to Sri Rama in Kerala, Tiruvilamala is the foremost, the image here being self-born. The other two temples are Triprayar near Trichur and Tiruvangad in North Kerala. Similarly there are only a few temples for Lakshmana in India, let alone in Kerala. There is one temple at Vennimala some 8 km. away from Kottayam. But it is not as well known as Tiruvilwamala.

To the south of the sanctums is the little Ganapati shrine, which faces east. Outside the temple and down below on the southern side a flight of stone steps lead to the shrine of Hariharaputra or Ayyappa installed on the same pedestal as Siva and Parvati.

The entire courtyard of the temple is paved with stone slabs. On the north side is the temple tank. There is no well inside the temple which is another peculiarity. The water required for daily worship is drawn from a tank situated in the north-east side. Therefore no one is allowed to use this tank. If any pollution is suspected water is brought from the nearby Bharatapuzha.

Punarjanani

About 3 km. from the temple on the east side there is a cave about one furlong long in the south-west direction. This is called Punarjanani and is believed to have been built by Viswakarma, the celestial builder at the behest of Parasurama. Unless human beings complete the prescribed number of births there is no salvation for them. It is as a result of evil deeds that man takes birth again and again. Passing through this cave is believed to relieve devotee of one such birth.

It is on Guruvayur Ekadasi day (November-December) that devotees undertake the ritual. On other days it is supposed to be haunted by spirits. It is full of ups and downs, stones, boulders and pits. At some places one has to kneel down and crawl. There are spots where it is pitch dark with no air and therefore suffocating. Yet hundreds of devotees cheerfully go through this ordeal, chanting the Lord's names. After coming out of the cave they take bath in several holy tirthas - Papanasini, Patala tirtha, Ambu tirtha and Kombu tirtha.

The story goes that it was Parasurama who brought the Ganges to Kerala which is known as Bharatapuzha. Just as the Ganga has several bathing ghats, with each having a Siva temple, on the banks of Baratapuzha there are five holy places - Tiruvilwamala, Tiruchikuzhi, Tirthala, Tirunavayi, and Tirumittakodu. Besides there are several Vishnu — Siva temples also on either side .What is Manikarnika ghat at Varanasi is Tiruvilwamala to Bharatapuzha.

After the Kurukshetra battle the Pandavas, on the advice of Sage Vyasas, came down here and performed oblations for those who were killed in the battle so that their souls might attain *sadgati*. Thereafter the Pandavas prayed at the temple and went through Punarjanani. They also installed a few temples on the banks of the river — Someswaram, Ivarmatom and Kothakurussi.

Ekadasi Festival

The important annual festival here is Ekadasi in the Malayalam month of Kumbha (February-March). On Ashtami, Navami and Ekadasi days there is vilakku (festival of lights), *niramalas* (decoration with flower garlands) and elephant processions. Elaborate feasts used to be held in the past, which like other temples have been discontinued with the change of times. On Ekadasi day, of course, hundreds of devotees observe fast and forgo their sleep. They spend their time in temple in prayers and in witnessing a variety of entertainments given freely by famed artistes.

Time was when local chiefs bore the expenses of several items in the temple. For example, the Cochin ruler conducted *athazha* (night) pooja, the Cochin Valyamma Thampuran, *ushapayasam* (pudding for early morning pooja), the Zamorin of Calicut, cooked rice and the Trivandrum Maharaja, *palpayasam* (the milk pudding). Now all these offerings have stopped. But those of common devotees have increased enormously and in this respect this temple ranks high among Kerala temples.

This temple, along with several other Kerala temples, was a prey to attack by Tipu Sultan, and also to repeated fires. In 964 Malayalam era, (1789 A.D.) Tipu's army attacked the temple and almost destroyed it. But when they heard that the temple belonged to Cochin ruler with whom Tipu had good relations further attack was abandoned and the sanctum was thus saved.

The Government of Cochin renovated the entire temple. The work was completed in 1036 M.E. (1861 A.D.) and a date for purificatory rites was fixed. But alas the same night a fire broke out and devastated the temple. The idol on the east *nada* was removed to the temple tank and was thus saved. The image on the west *nada* could not be removed being swayambhu. It took 25 days for the embers to die and when the idol was examined thereafter it was quite intact. The poojas were resumed. The present temple we see is the one renovated by the erstwhile Cochin Government in 1058 M.E. (1885 A.D.).

Parasurama had entrusted the property of the temple and its administration to six *illams.* They were called Parasudayavar. They belonged to the Moosad caste. The eldest of the six administered the temple in consultation

with others. Parasurama also appointed separate Tantris for east and west *nada*, and Nambudiris of five *illams* as temple priests. He also laid down proper pooja routine to be followed.

In course of time the administration of the temple passed on to Perumbadappu (Cochin) and Neduvirippu (Zamorin). But there were frequent quarrels between the two. They both approached the British for mediation. In those days Cochin was ruled by the powerful Sakthan Thampuran. The British decided in his favour although, by virtue of several landed properties lying in the region of Malabar, the administration should have properly gone to the Zamorin. Today the temple is under the administrative control of the Cochin Devaswom Board.

18. THE HISTORIC TALI TEMPLE

The Tali temple at Calicut (Kozhikode) is redolent of some of the glorious chapters in the history of old Kerala. It reminds you of the life and polity of the State in days gone by and of the glory of the great Zamorins who were among the most cultured and accomplished sovereigns of Kerala.

As a matter of fact the greatness of the Zamorins was closely associated with three temples: Tiruvalayanad, Tirunavayi and Kozhikode Tali. Their empire dates back to the installation of Porkhali Bhagawati at Tiruvalayanad. The Mamamkam at Tirunavayi was a twelve-yearly demonstration of their imperial pomp and pageant. The annual Revati Pattattanam at Tali was a seven-day feast of learning, comparable to the Vidvasadas of Janaka of Videha.

Tali is a term generally applied to a Siva temple and, like all Kerala temples, Kozhikode Tali was an independent sanctuary which belonged to Brahmins. In those days Kerala consisted of a number of temple-states and village republics belonging to Brahmins. In the temple-state the Lord was regarded as the head and everything was done in his name. The territory under their rule was called a *sanketam*.

Some *gramams* were also administered by *kazhakams* or advisory Boards, each under an officer called the Taliatiri. These villages were known as Talis, of which the important ones numbered eighteen. Among them Kozhilkode Tali was the most famous.

However this Tali was not founded by the Zamorins. As stated earlier, it belonged to fifty Nambudiri families of the Tali gramam. They also ran a Vedic pathasala or school at Salapuram, now called Chalapuram. They maintained intimate and cordial relations with their ruler, Porlatiri, the men even having *sambandham* or liaison with the thampurattis or princesses of the royal family.

Zamorin's Wrath

Their territory was beseiged and invaded by the Zamorin some time about A. D. 1200. With the occupation of Calicut by the Zamorin, Porlatiri was expelled from his *nadu* or land. Naturally, the Nambudiris of Tali did not like this and were very unhappy.

The Kolattiris of Chirakkal were the allies of Porlatiri and the enemies of the Zamorin. The story goes that the Tali Nambudiris helped a Kolattiri prince to smuggle himself into the Zamorin's palace in the guise of a Brahmin. A Thampuratti fell in love with him. And when the romance could no longer be concealed, the lovers fled, with the connivance of the Nambudiris.

The Zamorin naturally flew into a rage and seized the Tali temple by force inspite of the resistance of the Nambudiris who in those days were also doughty warriors. Many were killed by Zamorin's men and their bodies were dragged and thrown on the mound now called *Surgam* (Durgam) nearby.

According to another version, the Brahmins resorted to *pattini* or fast unto death seating themselves on the top of the Surgam. The Zamorin was however firm. They had helped his enemy and they brought dishonour on the royal family, making the sovereign a laughing-stock of all Kerala. He refused to submit to what he regarded as pure political blackmail, however holy or high its authors might be. Thus the misguided Brahmins were allowed to die.

The *pattini* is said to have taken place in the month of Thulam (October-November) and it lasted for seven days from Revati or the twenty-eight asterism to Thiruvatira, the sixth asterism, when the last of the Nambudiris who fasted passed away.

Revati Pattattanam

The temple did not suffer in any way by the change in management. But the death of the Brahmins cast its dismal shadow. The palace astrologers found an easy explanation for any *anishtam* or unpleasant event in the Zamorin's family from common cold to natural bereavement and insisted upon the expiation of this sin of *Brahmahatya* or slaughter of Brahmins. At last on the advice of Kolkunnathu Sivankal, the Zamorin instituted the annual *Pattattanam* in A. D. 1309-1310 at the Tali temple.

It consisted of a feast for seven days corresponding to the duration of the fast from Revati in Thulam to the following Thiruvatira, at the end of which the Bhattas or Brahmins, learned in the smritis and sastras, were each given a purse containing 101 *tanams,* which was equivalent to 360 *paras* or measures of paddy and which was enough to maintain one in all decency. This was a sort of annual pension and once granted it could be received by proxy on the principal's behalf.

The ceremony took place in the big *agrasala* or feeding hall, which was destroyed by Haidar's soldiers in 1766. Those who had been already enrolled formed the *pazhaya* or old Sabha while those eligible for enrolment were called the *putiya* or new Sabha. The former sat in the *agrasala* and the latter on the *vatilmatam* at the entrance to the temple proper. After the old members had received the *tanam* and resumed their seats, the names of the new members were read out by the Zamorin's Prime Minister, Mangat Acchan.

As each name was called Mullappalli Bhattatiri, who was the president, came to the *vatilmatam* with a lighted lamp and conducted the member to the *agrasala* to be seated before the Zamorin. After he had received the *tanam* he took his seat along with old Sabha. After every one received the *Pattattanam* the Zamorins and the princess present circumambulated the Vidvatsabha, and the members blessed them individually by placing their hands on the Zamorin's head.

Encouragement to learning

The Zamorin took a personal interest in the *Pattattanam.* The institution was a standing encouragement to learning and the like of which could be found nowhere else in India. To be admitted to the *tanam* was also a great honour. So rigorous was the test that even the versatile Meppathur Narayana Bhattatiri, the author of *Narayaniyam,* the Gospel of Guruvayur, had to go away disappointed six times before he was declared eligible. The scholars who emerged from the deliberations of the assembly as the most distinguished of the lot were conferred the title of Bhatta and the cash award.

The *Pattattanam* was not the monopoly of Malayali Brahmins. Learned Brahmins from *paradesa,* like Uddanda Sastrikal of Chinglepet (Tamil Nadu) and Chidambara Kavi received a hearty welcome at Kozhikode. Uddanda came here not as a suppliant seeking favours but as an intellectual pugilist intent upon flooring his rivals. “Flee, flee”, he said, “ye poets of Kerala, though elephants yourselves, here comes the majestic Uddanda, the lion that roams in the forests of Vedanta.” And before long he was admitted by Zamorin, Manavikrama, to an honoured place of 18 celebrated poets called *Patinettara Kavikal (Patinettu Kara Kavikal)* or the learned men of the (traditional) eighteen divisions of Kerala.

Battle of Wits

Only two of the many questions which Uddanda put to the Kerala prodigy Kakkasseri Bhattatiri and his ready answers have come down to us. Once the veteran Uddanda accosted the young aspirant with the words *Aakaro hrsvah* which would mean either the long "*a"* is short, or you are short in stature. At once came the reply: *Nahi, Nahi, aakaro dirghah, akaro hrsvah* - No, the long *a* is long, it is the short *a* that is short.

Another question: *Tava mata pativrataa,* your mother was devoted wife to her wedded Lord. It is obviously impossible to contradict it without impugning the mother's honour. But Kakkasseri was neither embarrassed nor appalled; he boldly contradicted it thus revealing his profound knowledge of Vedic marriage rite, *"Nahi, nahi,"* he said, "Soma was her first husband, Gandharva, the next, Agni, the third and the one born of man (his father) was the fourth (Rig-Veda VIII, iii, 27.5). Uddanda was thrilled and hugged the young scholar in joy.

It is noteworthy that in the four centuries that *Pattattanam* flourished in Kerala hundreds of Sanskrit works of merit made their appearance and the credit should go to the Zamorin. As Shri K. V. Krishna Ayyar put it, if Guruvayur revealed the Zamorin's devotion, Tirunavayi his power and pomp. Tali *Pattattanam* exhibited his love of learning and respect for learned men.

Though Tali originally meant a Siva temple, there is a Krishna temple also here on the north-east side. Siva faces east and Krishna west. Both are independent temples with separate *srikoils, nalambalams* and flagstaffs. But the Siva shrine is very ancient and the Kirshna temple appears to be a later addition.

The central shrine of Siva is quadrangular in shape with double prasadas or storeys. It has stone sculptures of excellence around its exterior sides. Inside there are three rooms. The Sivalinga, about two feet in height, is in the innermost recess. It is believed to be *swayambhu* or self-born. Legend has it that the sage Parasurama propitiated Siva who agreed to remain at the Tali temple in the form of a linga. It was Yogi Narayana, the mad (Narayanathu Bhranthari), who is said to have performed *kalasam* or purificatory ceremonies and installed other deities.

The temple also contained some notable examples of old workmanship in wood illustrating various puranas. The scenes and figures are boldly designed expressive of high emotions, of throbbing life and vigour.

In front of the *srikoil* there is the *mukhamandapa* with exquisite wood carvings over the ceiling. There is the usual image of Nandi. To its south is the Ganapati shrine. There is also another Balaganapati in the north-east. Ganapati homam is famous here.

Outside the *nalambalam* there is a small shrine for Narasimha facing west and a Sasta shrine in the north. In the north-west all the family deities of the Zamorin are kept in a small shrine and worshipped. This contains the images of Krishna, Devi and Ganapati as also a Sivalinga and a salagrama.

The beautiful image in the Sri Krishna shrine in the north-east side is a four-armed one with conch, disc, mace and lotus. A modern painting of Anantasayanam adorns the wall of the *vatilmatam*.

There are five poojas every day here and three *sivelis* or processions of the deity. *Namajapam* or repeating of the Lord's names is also conducted daily in the evenings as also Bhagavata *saptaham* annually. The annual *utsavan* begins on Vishu day (Kerala New Year's day) and lasts for 7 days. On the 8th day the *arattu* or bathing ceremony is held.

Renovations

The present temple was built by Manavikraman the great. Like several other temples in Kerala the Tali temple also, which was subjected to spoliation and desecration by Tipu Sultan, had been renovated at the close of the 18th century. Following a *devaprasnam,* conducted in 1964 renovation work was again taken up and completed in 1967 with a *navikarana kalasam* or purificatory rites performed on an elaborate scale. Then came the installation of flagstaffs for both the Siva and Krishna shrines on March 3, 1976. In the following year, Rigveda *laksharchana* was also conducted to commemorate the historic Revati *Pattattanam* which, alas, now belongs to history.

Thanks to the untiring efforts of the citizens of Calicut this once famous temple is again throbbing with life and divinity.

Worshipping both Siva and Krishna at one place as in Trichur, this writer could not help ruminating over the following lines of *Skandopanishad*

Sivaya Vishnurupaya Sivarupaya Vishnave
Sivasya hridayam vishnuh Vishnostu hridayam Sivah
Yatha Sivamayo Vishnuh evam Vishnumayah Sivah
Yathantaram na pasyami tathame swastirayushi

Siva in the form of Vishnu and Vishnu in the form of Siva (I bow down). Vishnu is the heart of Siva and Siva is the heart of Vishnu as both are essentially one. As I do not perceive any difference between the two may my life be blessed and prolonged.

19. TIRUVANGAD PERUMAL

A Brahmin form Kerala went to Kashi to have darshan of Kashi Viswanatha. There he met a group of sanyasins. One of them asked him where he hailed from. The latter replied "Talasseri" (as Tellicherry is known in Malayalam).

"Is it Talasseri where the holy Tiruvangad is situated?" was the next question.

"Yes", the Brahman replied.

"Then, why should you leave such a sacred place and come all the way to Kashi?" the sanyasins asked in chorus.

The Tiruvangad Sri Rama temple in North Kerala is indeed considered very important with unique characteristics of architecture. There are ever so many temples in Kerala dedicated to Siva, Krishna and Devi. But for Rama there are only three great temples. The Tiruvangad Sri Rama temple is one of them. The other two temples are Triprayar, near Guruvayur, and Tiruvilwamala near Palghat, described in chapters 14 and 17 respectively.

Tiruvangad is about 2 km. from Tellicherry station which is 69 km, to the north of Calicut on the Madras — Mangalore line of the southern Railway. It is a small town typical of Kerala. The temple is situated on a vast maidan of about six acres. In front, about three hundred metres away, there is a large *chira* or tank measuring about two acres.

Brass Pagoda

There are no records to indicate the origin or the construction of this ancient temple. According to *Kerala Mahatmyam,* a Sanskrit work, the deity is said to have been installed by Parasurama. But scholars dispute this. *Keralotpathi,* a Malayalam work, and Logan's famous *Malabar Manual,* which give a detailed account of traditional history of early Kerala, contain references to the temple. Logan refers to the temple as a "brass pagoda" and states that "the Hindu Pagoda in Tiruvangad dedicated to Sri Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, is the only brass pagoda covered with brass sheets instead of tiles of which the walls and gopurams were in a state of disrepair." Of the temple tank he mentions: "There are two large tanks in the town, the largest in Tiruvangad measuring 250 x 340 feet belonging to the temple".

An inscription on the *balikkal* or altar at the entrance to the temple reads that the temple was renovated in A.D. 826 and that the *balikkal* was donated by one Kaveri Ammal of Coorg. In any case there is no doubt that the temple is several centuries old.

According to legend the temple was installed by Swetamuni. Sage Agastya along with his disciples was proceeding to the Kaveri River for a holy dip. On the way he was obstructed and troubled by two hunters in a forest. Enraged, the sage cursed them both. Repenting their action the two pleaded with the sage for mercy. He advised them to perform tapas in two Siva temples. The two men did this and were redeemed. They were known as Neelarshi and Swetarshi.

The place where Neela performed penance became Neeleswaram which is known for its Siva temple. Sweta did tapas at Tiruvangad (*Tiru-van-kad*, literally the sacred big forest) and the place was named after him as *Swetaranyam (aranyam* meaning forest). Here he installed not only the deity of Siva for his tapas but also a Vishnu temple by its side, which is the present Sri Rama temple we see.

It is said that the Siva installed by Sweta was very fierce. To temper its fury another Siva temple has been constructed just opposite. Thus we have three temples situated on this vast maidan - two Siva temples facing each other on the north side (the one towards the west is known as *'vadakkedam*' and

the opposite one towards the east being *'kizhakedam'*) and the Sri Rama temple by the side.

There is another slightly varied version of this story: It says Neela was a devotee of Siva and so he installed the Siva shrines at Tiruvangad itself. Similarly Sweta who was a Vaishnavite built a shrine for Rama, his *ishtadevata*. Thus Tiruvangad became a centre for worship of Siva and Vishnu.

The main deity, Sri Rama, like most Vishnu images, has four arms. The three arms hold *sankha* (conchshell), *chakra* (discus), and the mace and the fourth is in the *abhaya mudra* (protection gesture). The mace is, however, held upside down, which is a peculiarity.

It is believed that the deity is depicted as the full form assumed by Sri Rama for annihilating Khara and his Rakshasa hordes including Dooshana and Trisiras who attacked the princes in exile in Dandaka forest at the instance of Soorpanakha, Ravana's sister.

It is probably because of the Khara episode that no Kathakali depicting the killing of Khara is staged in this temple. Once, while *khara vadham* or killing of Khara was being staged, when Khara called Rama to battle, the actor disappeared from the scene. With this the play was stopped and has not been staged again.

Three Temples

When the battle with Khara and his army was going on, Sita was hidden in a mountain cave, guarded by Lakshmana. It is believed the place where Sita hid herself was in the adjoining Pokinasseri *parambu* or maidan where there are shrines for Sita and Lakshmana. We are told that following a *devaprasnam* or astrological study, these shrines were demolished and the materials like stone, wood, etc. were given to the Rama temple. Plans are however afoot to construct a new temple here.

The idol at Tiruvangad is that of Vishnu, conceived and worshipped as Sri Rama. The local people endearingly call the deity Tiruvangad Perumal who grants their wishes.

Radiantly Beautiful

The image is radiantly beautiful. A Sanskrit sloka describes it as *megha syamala* (dark as rain-clouds), *komalanga* (beautiful of limbs), *aapannabhaya yogamudrita karam karunya rathnakaram* (with hand in the protection gesture and an ocean of kindness grants refuge to devotees in danger and seeking solace.)

Outside the sanctum on the left side is the equally, important deity of Hanuman, the foremost devotee of Rama, described by the Bhaktas of Vishnu as the "Junior Servant of Hari", (the Senior Servant being Garuda) who is always with Vishnu in personal attendance.

On the south side there are images of Subrahmanya and Ganapati in the same shrine. These idols were said to be in Peralasseri which during the invasion by Tipu Sultan were removed to Tiruvangad temple for safety.

There is the *mukhamandapam* or *namaskara mandapam* in front of the sanctum. On this there is Porkali Bhagwati in a wooden cage. One of the Rajas of Kottayam (of north Malabar and not the Kottayam of Travancore State), Vidwan Thampuran, who was a great patron of Kathakali and a composer of Attakathas, considered this Devi to be Vaageeswari, the goddess of learning and worshipped her.

There is an interesting story of the origin of this Goddess. Once a temple priest and a Marar who was a drummer entered into a bet. The Marar said he would bring the Devi there by playing 'pani' (ritual drumming as prescribed in the Agamas) and the priest agreed that if the goddess materialised he would immediately offer *naivedyam*. The Marar did bring forth the Goddess and as the priest had no time to cook the rice he offered it in the same uncooked condition. Even today the offering to the deity here is uncooked rice, rice merely washed in water.

As the Goddess was restless and started roaming inside the temple, causing fear among the devotees, she was bound by the power of mantra and kept in the cage built on the *mandapam*.

Treasure-house of Arts

The temple has some unique characteristics of architecture and is a treasure-house of sculpture and paintings. The *srikoil* is rectangular in shape with two storeys which are copper roofed. The front portion is vertical and the rear and side are sloped. There are three gold-plated *stupis* on the top ridge in the longitudinal direction at the entrance. The walls around the *srikoil* are embellished with beautiful images of Gods and Puranic figures which constitute a splendid array of statues in keeping with the imposing dignity of the architectural design of the structure.

The square-shaped *mukhamandapa* in front of the *srikoil* is also highly embellished with wood carvings on the ceiling, illustrating the story of Ramayana. Here the craft of the skilled carpenter has reached unsurpassed perfection and the figures are realistically modelled with idealistic dignity and finished in every detail with perfect accuracy.

There is also a longitudinal edifice in front of the *mandapa* leading to the *balikalpura* on the outside of which stands a flagstaff. The entire temple is surrounded by a modern-built *chuttambalam* covered over with Mangalore tiles. The walls of the *chuttambalam* are ornamented with exquisite mural paintings depicting scenes from the Ramayana.

A Bit of History

The Tiruvangad temple which, when viewed from the east, gives the appearance of a fort, finds repeated mention in the history of North Kerala. Several talks between the temple authorities on the one hand and the *naduvazhis* or Governors on the other, with representatives of the East India Company are said to have taken place in the premises of this temple. In 1750 when the combined forces of Kolathunad, Kottayam and Kadathunad lay siege on Tellicherry, irked by the machinations of the chief of Tellicherry Fort, Dorril, several strategic forts were captured. This included Tiruvangad also. In 1766 when Haider marched his army into North Kerala and the palace of Kolattiri at Chirakkal was seized its members took refuge in the Tiruvangad temple. Again when Tipu attacked the temple, its massive walls and the seven-storey gopuram were destroyed by his army. The plinth of these walls and gopuram are visible today.

The story goes that when Tipu directed his guns against the eastern gopuram from a nearby hill, a bullet from the temple in retaliation hit Tipu's cannon and immoblished it. Following this he had to stop the operations and stage a retreat. The place where Tipu assembled his army was known as *'perum porkalam'* literally large battlefield. This name in course of time came to be known as *'perumkalam'*. The *pallivetta*, the hunting expedition of the Lord during *utsavam* is conducted here.

Though the temple was desecrated by Tipu, it is noteworthy that the British were sympathetic towards it and one of its sub-collectors, namely Thomas Harvey Baber even turned a staunch devotee of the deity and became a regular visitor to the temple. It is said that once Baber was passing through the temple galloping on his horse. The horse suddenly stopped in its course and would neither go back nor go forward. Baber realised that this happened because he was indifferent to the Lord. He made amends and thus became a devotee of Sri Rama. It was he who constructed the massive outer walls of the temple as is revealed by the following inscription: "The wall around this pagoda was constructed under the supervision and patronage of T. H. Baber esq. in 1815."

The annual festival here begins on Vishu (Malayalam New Year's day) Sankramam day (April 14) with the hoisting of the temple flag. It lasts for

seven days with the daily elephant procession, special poojas and *Sri Bhuta bali* (offering of oblation at various altars) as also various entertainment programmes culminating in *arattu* or bathing the deity, on the last day in the temple tank.

Pattattanam, giving away gifts to learned men as we have seen at Tali temple, is also conducted here though on a much smaller scale. This is done on Thiruvonam asterism in Makaram (January-February) which is considered as the prathista day of the deity.

A favourite offering to the main idol, Sri Rama, is *kalabham* or smearing the image with scented sandal paste. To Hanuman, the offering is *avil* or beaten rice. *Niramala* or a decoration with garlands hung in profusion and *vilakku* is another popular offering.

The idol with the sandal paste and decorated with various ornaments is a sight to see.

20. RAJARAJESWARA OF TALIPARAMBA

Taliparamba is 25 km. from Cannanore, headquarters of Cannanore district. A historic place like Calicut or Tellicherry, its neighbourhood is sanctified by three temples — Siva or Rajarajeswara at Taliparamba itself, Sri Krishna at Trichambaram which is a few furlongs away, and again, Siva or Vaidyanatha at Kanjiragat, six km. from Taliparamba.

In olden days there was an unwritten rule that pregnant women should visit all the three temples. It was believed that the Lord of Taliparamba assured that the child born to the women who worship him will attain a high status, Krishna of Trichambaram endowed the child with good nature and mental qualities and Kanjiragat Vaidyanatha with long life.

The temple at Taliparamba is among the 108 ancient Kerala temples dedicated to Siva. It is as famous as the Siva temples at Vaikom, Ettumanur and Vadakkunnathan temple at Trichur.

Readers may recall the story of self-immolation of Sati, Siva's consort, recounted in Chapter 5 on Chengannur temple. The head of Sati is said to have fallen at the place where Taliparamba temple is situated and her yoni, reproductive organ, at Chengannur. The sanctity of Taliparamba is attributed to this.

The Three Siva Lingas

The Sivalinga here is believed to be thousands of years old. Legend has it that Siva gave three sacred Sivalingas to Parvati for worship. Once sage Maandhata propitiated Lord Siva with intense prayers. Siva was so pleased that he presented one of the Sivalingas to him with the injunction that it should be installed only at a place where there was no cremation ground. The sage, after searching all over, found Taliparamba the most sacred spot where he installed the linga.

After his death the linga however disappeared into the earth. Then his son Muchukunda offered similar prayers to Siva and got a second linga which too disappeared in course of time. Centuries passed. The third Sivalinga was handed down to Satasoman, a king of Mushaka (Kolathunad) dynasty who then ruled the region. He was an ardent devotee of Siva. On the advice of sage Agastya he prayed to Lord Siva who granted him the Sivalinga. The king installed it in the present temple built by him.

Sri Rama's visit

Sri Rama on his return from Lanka after annihilating Ravana and other Rakshasas rested here with his entourage. He offered prayers to Parameswara from the *mukhamandapa* in front of the sanctum sanctorum. Even today no one is allowed into this *namaskara mandapa* and offer prayers which is permitted in other temples for Brahmins.

One of the Zamorins was an ardent devotee of the Lord of Taliparamba. After years of intense worship he is said to have entered the sanctum sanctorum and merged with the God. Even today when the elder Zamorin dies the information should be given to the temple authorities and the Lord is supposed to observe mourning. Even the distant Travancore kings paid obeisance to the deity by offering an elephant whenever a ruler is crowned or visited the temple.

Taliparamba was formerly known as Perinjellur or Lakshmipuram in Sanskrit. This was one of the sixty-four gramams or villages in Kerala. There were sixty-four Nambudiri families in this village who were the *uralars* or temple trustees. The administration of Taliparamba was conducted on behalf of the Lord of the temple by Taliatiri elected from these Nambudiris. Taliatiri enjoyed enormous powers which he was expected to use for the protection of the people and also for the punishment of the evil-doers.

The Pride of Brahmins

The Brahmins were proud of their status and learning. When Marthanda Varma of Travancore sent invitations to them to participate in the very first *murajapam* he started they derided stating "that we have only *Perumtrikovilappan* (the Lord of Taliparamba) as our Maharaja." Such was the pride and esteem in which they held their deity.

According to *Kerala Mahatmya,* it was Bargavarama who brought 15,000 brahmins from Ahichatram and settled them at Taliparamba. Mayura Varma, one of the Kolattriris (as the rulers of Kolathunad were called) built the village for these Brahmins and endowed them with properties to enable them to lead a life of piety and learning. Indeed there was no village in Kerala to equal Taliparamba in respect of learning, devotion etc.

Siva Yogi

Among those who contributed to the prosperity of the village and the temple, the foremost was Sivangal. He was also known as Siva Yogi or Atyasrami though his real name was Raghavananda. At the time of King Ravi Varma Kulasekhara (1299-1314) of Venad, himself a great scholar, Sivangal shone like a bright star in North Kerala. He was born in Vallavu Village, about 3 km. to the north of Taliparamba temple and there is still a matham, called Siva Yogi matham, on the south side of the temple, where Siva Yogi lived.

He learnt the Vedas, Mimamsa, mantra and tantra and took sanyas at very early age. Like Vilwamangalathu Swamiyar (Leelasukan), he was a great devotee of Siva. Hence he came to be known as Siva Yogi. The Lord of Taliparamba was so pleased with him that He appeared before him and tendered *jnanopadesa.*

The sage was taken by the illustrious Zamorin to Calicut where he performed poojas in the palace. After this the Zamorins became miraculously prosperous.

Sreedhara Menon in his *A Survey of Kerala History* records that Raghava, the famous king of Kolathunad, who ruled early in the 14th century, was a patron of Raghavananda who wrote the *Krishnapadi* commentary on the Bhagavata Purana.

Rendezvous of Scholars

From time immemorial Taliparamba was a rendezvous of scholars and men of letters from all over the State. They were received in a special *mandapa* called *Kottumpuram* (which is on the left side of the temple courtyard as you enter) and honoured with gifts like shawls and bracelets. Those who were thus honoured could enter any assembly of scholars and were assured of a ceremonious welcome.

The most distinguished of the royal poets of the Zamorin of Calicut, Uddanda Sastri, being a Nirgunopasaka was never given to worshipping of deities. Whenever he visited any temple he simply stood before the deity folding his hands, but when he stood before Rajarajeswara, the king of kings, at Taliparamba he was so over whelmed by the magnificence of the deity that he unconsciously uttered the words, 'Hara Hara Mahadeva', and prostrated himself before the Lord. Then and there he composed a verse to the effect that when he saw the splendorous crescent adorning the idol his hands automatically joined together in prayer.

His celebrated work, *kokilasandesa,* contains references to some of the most important temples of North Kerala, such as Tiruneli, Taliparamba, Trichambaram, Triprangode and Tirunavayi.

Another Malayalam work which gives details of the origin of this temple is *chelluranathodayam* which is a *champu,* a narration in verse and prose, written by Nilakanthan Namboodiripad who belonged to Perinjellur gramam, the original name of Taliparamba. (Some say the *champu* was written by Punam Nambudiri, one of the *patinettara kavikal* or eighteen royal poets of the Zamorin's court.)

Attack by Tipu Sultan

The Taliparamba temple also was subject to attack by Tipu Sultan. One finds relics of old gigantic gopuram at the entrance which was demolished by Tipu's army. The story goes that when the temple was under siege, the head priest was inside the sanctum sanctorum and prayed ceaselessly day and night. It is further said that the commander of the army was bitten by a black snake and a hooded serpent appeared before every soldier thus immobilising the army and saving the temple from total destruction. But Tipu's invasion caused many old Nambudiri families to flee for safety and settle in the erstwhile Travancore State.

The central shrine is an ancient quadrangular structure surmounted by two roofs one ending at the lower level and the top one resting on walls rising from the lower roof. The whole edifice has a pyramidal roof. Parallel to the central shrine and in front of it is the *namaskara mandapa* with sloped roofs and two projecting gables at either end. The main building has only one *stupi* and the *namaskara mandapa* three.

The *balikkal* has no roof but is embellished by mysterious figure with a peculiar face. In front of the *balikkal* is a small rectangular building with a pyramidal roof, which is not usually found anywhere else. There is no flagstaff. An inscription on the structure of the temple tank (which is a little away from the temple on the north side) indicates that the temple and the tank were renovated in 1524 A.D.

Offerings

The main offering here is *naiamrithu* or ghee, made available to devotees in small pot for a rupee each. The custom is that just as kings and emperors are seen only by offering some gifts-*kazhchha*-the Lord of Taliparamba, who is King of Kings, can be seen only by placing *naiamrithu* on the *sopanam* (steps leading to the sanctum). The ghee offered is used for *abhisheka* and for lighting the lamps in the central shrine.

On auspicious days like Mondays, *pradosham* etc., hundreds of such small *naiamrithu* pots can be seen placed before the deity. Mahasivaratri and Vishu (Malayalee New Year's day) are the two main annual festivals here, each lasting a day, not several days like *utsavams* in other Kerala temples.

A peculiarity here is that women devotees are not allowed to enter the temple during day time; they can enter and worship only after *athazha* (night) pooja. At this time the Lord is supposed to be happy in the company of his consort, Parvati, and pleased to grant the desires of His devotees who pray to Him with humility and sincerity.

Kanjiragat Siva

It is in order to remove the above disability of women that King Satasoman built another Siva temple at Kanjiragat, already referred to, where women can enter at all times without any restriction.

Generally Mondays are considered auspicious in Siva temples. Women observe *vrata* on these days and pray to Lord Siva to grant longevity to their husbands. But at Kanjiragat Sundays are important because Siva here is said to have a Surya aspect. Pradosha is another auspicious day as in all Siva temples.

Dhara or *abhisheka* is the main offering here. If the tirtha and prasad after *dhara* is taken all the bodily ills would disappear – that is the popular belief and experience among devotees.

According to legend a Brahmin was once afflicted with leprosy. On the advice of Garuda he came to Kanjiragat and did tapas to propitiate Lord Siva. He was cured of the disease. Even today people suffering from skin and various other diseases come here and observe bhajan. Vaidyanatha cures them all.

Coming back to Taliparamba, the Sivalinga here is only about three feet in height but when decorated with the luminous crescent i.e. with the three eyes which are quite large and prominent and the nose all made in gold the idol looks much taller and bigger and shines like thousand suns. One remembers the beautiful description of Kailasapati in Thunjath Ezhuthachan's *Adhyatma Ramayana:*

Kailasachale, suryakoti sobithe, vimalalaye, ratnapeede, samavishtam, dhyananishtam, phalalochanam, munisiddha, devadhi sevyam.

Siva residing in Kailasa, with the lustre of a crore of suns with the crescent mark on his forehead, seated on a pedestal of jewels and adored by sages, siddhas and devas.

21. TRICHAMBARAM KRISHNA TEMPLE

The city of Mathura was agog with excitement. Kamsa had arranged a great display of wrestling by the famed Mushtika, Chanura, Kuta, Shala and Toshala. An arena had been erected specially for this and the place was fast filling up with eager spectators. The sound of bugles and trumpets filled the air.

It was a seemingly innocent show put up by Kamsa for the amusement of his subjects, but the real purpose was the killing of the two young boys from Brindavan - Krishna and Balarama.

As the trumpets announced the arrival of the wrestlers one by one, Krishna and Balarama were also approaching the arena to watch the fun. But their way was blocked at the entrance by a huge elephant. It was the great royal elephant, Kuvalayapida, which had been purposely stationed there to provoke them.

The mahout spurred the animal to charge the young boys. But Krishna who had killed many asuras with ease broke one of the tusks of the elephant and using it as a weapon killed Kuvalayapida and the mahout.

Then the boys appeared in the courtyard of the palace and the crowd stared at them as if spellbound. They appeared differently to different people. The wrestlers led by Chanura thought they were two thunder bolts personified, the ordinary men thought they were the best among men, the women thought that each of them was Manmatha, the gopalas were thrilled that they were one of them, but Kamsa thought of them as death incarnate.

And death incarnate they proved themselves to be. This was the first time Kamsa saw his enemy face to face and his heart was full of fear. He saw Krishna grabbing Chanura by his arm and raising him aloft and then dashing him to the ground. The same fate befell Mushtika and others.

Kamsa found all his plans going awry. He fumed and fretted. He asked his men to put Nanda in prison, to execute Vasudeva. He did not even spare his own father Ugrasena who took sides with his enemies.

Krishna could no longer bear these harsh words. He leaped to the terrace, caught hold of Kamsa like Garuda grasping a king cobra and threw him to

the ground. He then fell on him and holding his neck in his two hands crushed the life out of him.

At the same time heavenly music was heard. The devas showered flowers on the brothers. The entire city of Mathura was full of joy and happiness, having been rid of its wicked king. Krishna thus accomplished the very purpose of his avatara.

Jubilant Krishna

It is this jubilant Krishna after the killing of Kamsa that is depicted in all its splendour at Trichambaram.

It is about two km. north-east of the Taliparamba Siva temple. Devotees, especially those coming from outside, generally visit this temple also after worshipping Rajarajeswara at Taliparamba. This incidentally shows that even in the old days people in Kerala did not differentiate between Siva and Vishnu and they worshipped both deities with the same fervour.

According to legend, the place was once a big forest, called Sambaravanam or Sambara forest. There was one Sambara Maharshi here, who by practising tapas for several years and propitiating Mahavishnu, attained oneness with the God. Henceforth people felt the divine presence here and their devotion and faith gradually gave shape to a temple. It is not known whether the temple came into existence in Dwaparayuga or Kaliyuga. There is a general belief that this Vishnu temple was built soon after the Siva temple at Taliparamba in order to temper the fierceness of Siva.

As in the case of several other temples in Kerala, Parasurama is also credited with the construction of this temple. When he came to Trichambaram he had the wonderful vision of the Lord after annihilating Kamsa - probably the same vision which Sambara Maharshi had earlier. After constructing the temple Parasurama laid down the pooja routine and stipulated the different festivals to be observed in the temple.

A Bit of History

According to the *Mushakavamsa,* a historical *mahakavya* in Sanskrit composed by Atula which narrates the history of Mushaka kingdom till the 11th century A.D., King Valabha is credited with having renovated the Vishnu temple at Trichambaram. This indicates that the temple had been in existence much earlier than the 11th century A.D.

Incidentally, Mushaka country (which later came to be known as Kolathunad, North Malabar, ruled by Kolattiris), had been ruled by illustrious kings like Vikrama Rama, Jayamani, Valabha II and Srikanta. It was Vikrama Rama who saved the famous shrine of Sri Mulavasam, the famous Buddhist shrine, from the havoc of sea erosion. King Valabha was also a generous patron of learning. It was he who built the port of Valabhapattana which later on got corrupted into Valayapattana and then into Valarpattana, i.e. the modern Balipattanam, a picturesque town on the plam-fringed, coast of North Malabar, which you pass while travelling from Cannanore to Taliparamba.

King Valabha was succeeded by his younger brother Srikantha who was also called Rajadharma. The poet Atula who composed the *Mushakavamsa* lived in his court.

Peculiar Customs

There are two peculiar customs observed here, which reinforce the belief that the deity here represents the Lord after Kamsavadha. One is the offering of *naivedya* immediately after the sanctum is opened for the day every morning. The belief is Krishna after killing Kamsa went to his mother Devaki and asked for food stating that he was very hungry after the ordeal. It is to commemorate this event that the ritual of offering food the first thing in the morning is observed.

The other is the prohibition of elephants being taken anywhere near the temple. It may be recalled that the royal elephant Kuvalayapida charged Krishna and Balarama while they were entering the palace of Kamsa. Since this incident Krishna had developed hatred against elephants. For this reason no one dares taking an elephant near the temple although elephants are very much part of all other Kerala temples where the deities are mostly carried atop these animals in procession.

Once, the story goes, a wealthy Muslim who purchased a beautiful elephant decided to conduct a test and also exhibit his valour. Against the advice of everyone he mounted the elephant and took it near the temple on the eastern side. Lo! Suddenly the doors of the sanctum which were closed opened and a thunder was heard. The elephant's front legs bent and it fell down throwing off the mahout. He realised the power of the Lord, repented his action and made amends by making offerings.

Of Great Antiquity

The temple we see today at Trichambaram is the one which had undergone extensive renovation and reconstruction after it was subjected to spoliation and desecration by Tipu Sultan during his invasion of several temples in Kerala. Many important temples like this underwent repairs and reconstruction between the close of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. These were the Siva temples at Tali, Tiruvannur, Trikkandiyoor, Tiruvanchikulam, Tirumittakkode, Trittala, Triparangode and Sukapuram; the Vishnu temples at Trichambaram and Tirunavayi and the Sri Rama temple at Tiruvangad, Triprayar and Tiruvilwamala, all of which have distinct architectural features.

According to Shri R. V. Poduval, the "Krishna temple at Trichambaram which abounds in excellent wood carvings, illustrating stories from the Bhagavata, is a splendid example of wise renovation. Its central shrine and the *mandapa* in front are covered with two prasadas or storeys with a projecting gable to the front of the lower roof. There are four projecting gables to the top pyramidal roof surmounted by a *stupi*.

The temple, according to Shri K. V. Soundara Rajan, author of *Temple Architecture in Kerala,* is an early one, dating in origin to the 10th-11th century, and that at least two major renovations have occurred. These were completed in the 14th - 15th and 17th - 18th centuries.

The central shrine which faces east is perfectly square in plan and therefore of great antiquity. This holy of holies, as Ronald Bernier describes, "holds a large image of Krishna carved of stone and hung with metal ornaments. It can be seen in a halo of lights in the center of double-walled *garbhagriha*. The *srikoil* is meaningful and beautiful for its mysterious interior and exterior carvings below the roofs, but also for murals that date from the 15th and 16th centuries. These represent an early state of surviving wall painting in Kerala."

A little to the north of the main entrance to the temple there is a little pond of about 30 square feet at the centre of which there is a Durga shrine facing west. This tank is considered a holy tirtha and hence no one is permitted to take bath in it. The water level remains always the same; it neither increases

during the rainy season nor decreases during summer. At night it looks enchanting with the oil lamps lit around the temple reflected in its water.

Small and Beautiful

Comparing Trichambaram temple with other temples in Kerala, Nalamkal states it is not as big as the temples at Vaikom, Ettumanur, Haripad, Kutalmanikyam or even Taliparamba. “If Taliparamba,” he states, “is a lotus, Trichambaram is a rose.” It is small and beautiful. The temple does not also attract large and continuous crowds like Guruvayur. Yet the local belief is that in olden days when transport was not easily available and people could not visit Guruvayur easily, the Lord came down at Trichambaram to bless them. And like Guruvayurappan, Trichambaresar grants the desires of his devotees.

Once a man afflicted with a severe skin disease with sores all over the body came to Trichambaram as a last resort. He spent his entire time in the temple worshipping the Lord. He would make his appearance in the morning as the sanctum opened and would go out only at night when the temple doors were closed. He often sat on the platform beneath an *Ilanji* tree on the south side. The fruit falling on his body hurt him and he writhed in pain. One day he cried out to the lord and asked Him why he did not show mercy to him. Eventually the tree stopped bearing any fruit and he was also cured of the fell disease.

Even today there is a custom during the temple festival when the dancer carrying the idol on his head dances before the tree and devotees keep a ring on a leaf and make obeisance. The ring is available from the temple authorities for a token amount and many devotees observe the ritual hoping that the Lord would fulfil their desires as He did in the case of the man mentioned above.

Annual Festival

The annual festival at Trichambaram is in the month of March. It starts with the flag-hoisting ceremony on 22nd of the Malayalam month of Kumbha. The same night the Balarama deity from Dharamkulangara (Mazhur) six km. away is brought in procession. As already mentioned there is no elephant for the procession. The images of both Krishna and Balarama are carried on the head by priests who dance to the accompaniment of drums. The *nrittam* or dance takes place at night daily up to the 2nd of Meenam month at Pookothunada, a place on the main road about 2 furlongs from Trichambaram temple.

The divine dance lasts till the morning delighting hundreds who flock to see the festival. The *pallivetta*, the Lord's hunt, takes place on the 4th of Meenam and the *arattu*, bathing ceremony, on the 5th. On the 6th the famous farewell takes place between the brothers which provide a grand finale to the
15-day festival. This is something like the meeting that takes place between Vaikathappan or the Lord Siva of Vaikom and his son Udayanapurathappan or Lord Subrahmanya of Udayanapuram. The event which takes place in a maidan near the temple attracts hundreds of thousands of people from far and near.

There is a legend behind the practice of conducting *nrittam* at Pookothunada on the main road. Years ago there were several Brahmin houses on either side of the road. Pookothunada was the courtyard of one of the houses called Pookathillam. Here there lived a devout Nambudiri woman. Like Kururamma, before whom Guruvayurappan appeared at her bidding, the Lord of Trichambaram appeared before the woman at will. The lady who never missed her visit to the temple and offering of butter to the Lord in course of time became so old and sick that she could no longer pay any visit to the temple.

Her one regret, however, was that she could not witness the *nrittam* during the annual festival, which took place at the temple. She prayed ardently to the Lord and expressed her desire to see the dance. That night, as the dances commenced, as though in a trance, the dancers made their way to the Pookothillam and danced to the joy of the old woman. This practice

continued although the Brahmin houses are no longer there today. All the same people see divinity in this dance and they liken it to the dance Krishna danced on the serpent Kaliya or the Rasalila performed in Brindavan.

As we leave Trichambaram let us recall the graphic description of Sri Krishna in Cherusseri Nambudiri's famous poem, *Krishna Gatha,* which tells the story of the lord from birth to ascension:

Dark as a dark rain-cloud,
his hair beautifully knotted,
a flute in his hand
an anklet on his foot,
And a thread across his chest,
his clothes the colour of yellow turmeric,
Krishna, the nonpareil, sheds lights about him.

22. A ROUND - UP

"Kerala," it is rightly said, "is a land of temples as it is a land of hills, backwaters and spices." It is not possible, even if one devotes one's lifetime, to do full justice to all the temples of this land. Hence only a few selected temples could be included for detailed narration in the foregoing chapters. An attempt is made here to make a quick survey of some more temples by rapid circumambulation, or *ottapradakshinam,* as they say in Kerala.

The Janardana Swamy Temple, Varkala

Starting from Trivandrum, one cannot miss the age-old Sree Janaradana Temple at Varkala which attracts a great number of devotees from all over the country. It is located about two km. west of Varkala railway station (on the Trivandrum-Quilon line) atop a hill on the coast.

There is an interesting legend behind it. Once when Brahma was relaxing in his 'Vyjayanti' assembly, the sage Narada entered singing the praises of Sree Narayana. Brahma was so enraptured that he fell at the feet of Narada seeing him not as a son but as Hari Himself. The other devas who saw this burst into laughter and Brahma, greatly embarrassed, infuriated, cursed them banishing them to earth where they could purify their minds and acquire knowledge and wisdom.

Narada consoled the devas and advised them to do penance at the place where his *valkalam* (garment made of bark of a tree) fell. And the place where it landed is now called 'varkala' a colloquial form of *valkalam*. The devas built a temple there dedicated to Lord Krishna. This was however destroyed by sea erosion.

Lord Brahma, the legend goes, came to earth one day to conduct a yaga. Lord Mahavishnu as Sree Janardana Swamy appeared before him to bless the devas and redeem them. The presiding deity of Varkala temple is thus Sree Janardana Swamy. The image has four hands - one holding divine water, another, the conch, the third, the discus and the fourth, the mace.

Sree Janardana is said to have brought the holy Ganga here with the help of the 'Sudarasana Chakra'. The holy water collected is now known as *Chakra Tirtha*. The water used for the temple is from this source.

It is widely believed that worship at this shrine cures many ills which explains why devotees come here from all over the country and even abroad including non-Hindus. The chief offering made, is *mukhacharthu* and *muzhukappu* i.e. decorating the face and whole body respectively with sandal paste.

The annual festival – *arattu* – is a 10 day event commencing with the *kodiyettam* or flag-hoisting ceremony on Kartika day and ending with

arattu on Uttram day in Meenam (March-April).

Varkala is also famous for the Papanasam holy spring, which is a health resort in addition to being a place which elevates the pilgrim spiritually. Sree Narayana Guru, the great social reformer, chose the nearby Sivagiri here for meditation. He built the Sarada Mutt temple at Sivagiri which attracts innumerable devotees.

Sree Subrahmanya Swamy Temple, Haripad

Situated at 51 km. on the Quilon-Alleppey Road, this is the oldest and most important of all Subrahmanya temples in Kerala. The image of the deity with four arms is also the biggest of the kind. It is believed to have been originally worshipped by Parsurama. A virtuous man had a dream that there was a wonderful image lying on a river-bed. This was confirmed by astrologers and thanks to the enthusiasm of the local people, the image was brought out from the river and enshrined in the present temple. The boat festival of the Paipad River which is observed as a national festival is in commemoration of the enthusiasm exhibited by the people of those days.

In 1921 A.D. the temple was destroyed by a fire. It was rebuilt with the *anakottil* (elephant shed), *kuttamblam,* a big tank etc.

Several annual festivals are celebrated in this temple - the Avani, *utsavam* in Chingom (August-September), Markazhi *utsavam* in Dhanu (November-December), Chitra *utsavam* in Medom (April - May), Kartika in Vrischikam (November - December) and Taipuyam (January - February), *Kavadiyattam,* dance with *kavadi,* is the most important offering here. *Kavadi* is a bow-shaped wooden structure decorated with tapestry and peacock feathers carried on the shoulders of pilgrims as an offering to God Subrahmanya.

Mullakkal Devi Temple, Alleppey

Situated in the heart of the busy Alleppey town, that Venice of Kerala, this is a special type of temple with no roof over the sanctum sanctorum and the deity exposed to sun and rain. The other parts of the temple also do not conform to the architectural pattern of Kerala temples except the gopuram in front and the grand *anakottil* (elephant house) behind it.

This temple is famous for its *chirappu* which is an 11 - day festival starting from Dhanu 1st (around December 15). The entire town wears a festive look with flags and festoons and throbs with activity. Apart from the customary rituals and elephant processions there is almost round the clock programme of music, dance etc. providing entertainment for the devotees. Navaratri is also celebrated here with eclat.

There are different legends about the origin of the temple. A Thampuran of the Chempakasseri royal family had dwelt at the very spot where the temple stands now. He grew a jasmine plant in the palace courtyard and tended it with care. One evening as he stood admiring the flowering plant, he saw a feminine figure of extraordinary beauty and charm picking some flowers. The Tampuran understood that it was none other than the Devi herself standing in all splendour and glory. He pleaded with her to bless the place always with her presence. The Devi granted his request and was thus installed there.

According to another tradition, once a Brahmin devotee of Devi came here from Kolathunad. When he arrived at Mullakkal it was dusk, the time for evening pooja. He, therefore, went to the nearby tank for bath keeping the idol of the Devi he carried under a jasmine plant. When he returned he found the idol rooted to the ground and try as he might it could not be moved. The Brahmin understood the divine manifestation, built a temple and installed the Devi in it.

Because of the association of the Devi with jasmine, she is known as Mullakkal Bhagwati and the place abounds in jasmine flowers which have a fragrance of their own.

The Tirunakkara Mahadeva Temple, Kottayam

Situated on the Tirunakkara hill, in the very heart of Kottayam town, is the famous Siva temple built by a king of the Tekkumkoor royal family which reigned over these parts before they were subjugated by the erst-while Travancore State ruler. Their palace was at Thaliyil, near Kottayam.

The Raja was very pious and an ardent devotee of Siva. Every month he visited the Vadakkunnathan temple at Trichur and offered worship there. When he became old and infirm he felt he would no longer be able to undertake the long journey to Trichur. During that visit which proved to be his last he prostrated himself before the Lord and weeping, he thought to himself that death would be preferable to living without worshipping Vadakkunnathan.

That very night Lord Vadakkunnathan appeared before him and consoled him stating that he need not visit Trichur any more and that He would appear in the Tirunakkara hill. The king on his way back got down at Vaikom and worshipped at the Mahadeva temple there. There he met a Brahmin named Perapparambu Nambudiri. He was so poor that the king took pity on him and brought him along with him to Kottayam where he lived happily.

One day while the farmers were hoeing the ground on the slopes of Nakkara hill, the hoe struck against something hard below the earth. A cracking sound was heard and blood was seen oozing out. The perplexed servants ran to their master who, in examining the spot, found a beautiful Sivalinga with a bull in granite stone in front of it and *inexora alba* plant in the rear. Everything was as divined by the Lord and the king was overjoyed. He called in Perapparambu Nambudiri to offer poojas and soon constructed a temple.

This is the origin of the Mahadeva temple at Kottayam with its self-born Sivalinga. Owing to the presence of the Lords here the Nakkara hill came to be known as Tirunakkara hill. Perapparambu Nambudiri of course became the first priest of the temple.

The temple has fine wood carvings in the *balikalpura* which display high artistic finish and excellence. The paintings over the outer walls of the

srikoil which are erotic in character look as though pulsating with life and vigour.

The grandest annual festival here is the *arattu utsavam* lasting 10 days from 1st to 10th of Meenam (March). Lakhs of people visit the temple during the festival which offer various cultural programmes and variety entertainments. Another occasion when the temple is visited by innumerable devotees is the two-month (mid - November to mid - January) pilgrimage season of Sabarimala.

The Udayanapuram Temple

In the chapter on Vaikom Mahadeva temple we discussed the Ashtami festival with the ceremonies based on the father and son relationship of Vaikkathappan and Udayana-purathappan, the Lord Subrahmanya of Udayanapuram temple. The temple which is 3 km. to the north of Vaikom is situated by the side of the Alwaye-Vaikom bus route.

With its thick compound walls it closely resembles the Vaikom temple and it is believed that worship at Vaikom temple becomes complete only when they offer worship in the Udayanapuram temple too. This is especially so in the morning of the Ashtami festival.

Dedicated to Kartikeya, the temple is considered as sacred as the famous Palni Subrahmanya temple. As such the Kartika day and the Shashti falling in the bright lunar fortnight are important days every month attracting a large number of devotees.

Taipuyam in Makaram (January-February) is of course the most sacred day when hundreds of *kavadis* are brought here in a ceremonious manner. After observing fast for seven days devotees carry *kavadi* containing various articles for *abhishekam* - milk, ghee, honey, panchamirtam (a pudding consisting of banana, jaggery, honey etc.) sandal paste etc. according to one's vow. They first go to Vaikom in procession to the accompaniment of music and drums. After offering worship there they move to Udayanapuram temple where the contents are emptied and offered to the deity as *abhishekam*.

The *mandapam, balikalpura* and *srikoil* are adorned with beautiful carvings and paintings which speak of the antiquity of the temple. In the *mandapam* especially the entire story of the Ramayana has been graphically delineated on its four beams which attract connoisseurs of art.

There is an interesting legend about the interchange of deities at Udayanapuram and Kumaranallur. The former temple was actually intended for Bhagawati and hence was originally known as Udayanayakeepuram while the latter was to be the abode of Kumara or Subrahmanyam. It is said that it was the Goddess who intruded into the temple originally intended for Subrahmanya. Hence that temple was named Kumaran — alla — ooru

meaning not for Kumara (Subrahmanya). Similarly with the change of deity at Udayanapuram, Udayanayakeepuram originally meant for the Goddess came to be known as Udayanapuram. The fact that *Bhagawati seva* (an offering in the form of Bhagawati worship) is still conducted as offering at Udayanapuram confirms the fact that the temple was in fact meant for the Goddess.

The Kumaranallur Temple

Kumaranallur is about 3 km. along the M. C. Road from Kottayam and further about four furlongs north-west takes you to the temple.

Once the nose-ring of the idol in the famous Madura Meenakshi temple was missing. It was presumably lost by the priest while removing the garlands from the deity in the morning. The Pandya king who heard about this was so enraged that he ordered to behead the priest if he failed to retrieve it in a day.

The priest was distressed and did not get a wink of sleep during the night. As though prompted by the Goddess he fled for his life in the thick of night. As he groped his way a light flashed in front of him showing the way till he reached Kumaranallur. There the Devi got into the temple which had been constructed by Cheraman Perumal for the installation of Lord Subrahmanya (Kumara). As explained earlier, since the Devi intruded into this temple it got the name of Kumaranallur.

Cheraman Perumal was however enraged at this intrusion and he was bent on disgracing Her. But he had to repent soon as the whole place became enveloped with fog, thus acquiring the name of Manjoor. The king realised the greatness of Devi and lost no time in consecrating her in the temple. He engaged a thousand Nairs for service in the temple and entrusted its management to twenty-eight Nambudiri families.

Generally Krishna sila is used for making idols but the idol here is made of antimony sulphurate (Anjanakal). Adorned with *shankha* and *chakra* the idol is very attractive and an artist's delight.

The temple is patterned on the Tamil Nadu style probably because of its connection with the Madurai temple and there is still in existence here a family known as Madurai Nambudiris, supposedly the descendants of the runaway priest from Madurai.

The important festival of this temple is Trikartika celebrated in the month of Vrischikam (November-December). On this day *naivedyam* is offered on the compound wall of Udayanapuram and Vadakkunnathan temples. It is said that the gods in these temples were greatly charmed by the beauty of

Devi who was returning after her Kartika bath. They were believed to have stood on the compound walls of their temples looking with longing at the charming figure of the passing Devi. The priests of the temple had to search for their deities frantically and finally located them standing on the walls! It is to commemorate this that poojas are offered on the walls.

The Poornathrayeesa temple at Tripunithura

The story of Santanagopalam occurring in the Bhagavata is well known. Santanagopala was a Brahmin residing in Dwaraka, whose nine children died as soon as they were born. Every time this happened the helpless Brahmin took the dead child to the doors of Bhagawan and lamented cursing that his child died because the ruler was avaricious, wicked and spent his time in sensual pleasures. On the ninth occasion Arjuna who was sitting with the Lord assured the Brahmin that he would protect the child failing which he would jump into fire.

But inspite of all the precautions Arjuna took, the child died and to keep his vow he prepared himself to jump into a huge fire. At that moment Krishna appeared and took Arjuna in his chariot to Vaikuntha. There they bowed to the infinite Lord who said: “I was eager to see you both. Therefore I had brought here the Brahmin’s children. Now take these children back to the Brahmin.” Arjuna did so and realised that whatever prowess one possessed is due to the Grace of the Lord.

While going back, the legend goes, Arjuna took the idol of Krishna along with him. He was in search of a fitting place to install it and found it at Tripunithura - near Ernakulam - the meeting place of the three vedas, Rig, Yajur and Sama which flourished here.

According to the legend the Brahmin from Dwaraka who got back his dead children also came here and became the chief priest. The present chief priest Puliyannoor Nambudiri is said to be a descendant of that Brahmin.

The place where Arjuna installed the idol was surrounded by a thick growth of seasame. He gathered a few seeds, crushed them and lighted a lamp with the oil. Thus the offering of gingeli oil became most important here. Oil worth one *puthan* (a small coin of the old Cochin State) is all what the Lord wants from his devotees!

The idol is of *panchaloha* and the Lord sits on Adisesha made of silver, the hood of the serpent forming a kind of umbrella over his head. It is incredible but true that the idol does not appear to touch the ground.

There are three festivals here every year. The first in *Chingom* (August-September) lasting 8 days from Swati to Thiruvonam asterisms, the second in the month of *Vrischikam* (November-December) lasting 15 days and the third in *Kumbham* (February - March) lasting 8 days.

The Lord Siva of Ernakulam

Devala was a Rishi's disciple serving his Guru in his ashram on the slopes of the Himalayas. One day the boy while collecting material for rituals came across a serpent. Out of fear he killed it. The Rishi who came to know about this became angry and cursed the boy. As a result, the boy's face turned into a serpent's hood. On account of this he came to be known as Nagarshi. The boy repented and prayed to the Rishi to restore his original face. The Rishi said this would be possible only if he propitiated Lord Siva over several years with the *panchakshara* mantra.

So Nagarshi set out on his pilgrimage to various places of worship all over the country. One day he had a dream that he would come by a Sivalinga in a place called Bahularanyam and whenever this linga gets stuck that moment he would be redeemd from the curse. This linga was the one made out of earth by Arjuna to propitiate Lord Siva on account of his defeat at the hands of Kirata.

Nagarshi took this linga and went to a jungle near the seashore. There was also a tank nearby. Seeing this strange figure - a man with a serpent's hood - people pelted stones at him. He hid behind a bush and spent the night in meditation. Next morning he decided to leave the place but the linga got stuck there.

Realising the moment of his release from the curse had come he went to the tank to take a bath. But he never came out and disappeared in the water. Since Nagarshi disappeared in the tank it came to be known as Rishinagakulam which was later corrupted to Ernakulam, *kulam* meaning tank in Malayalam.

Thus the deity at the famous Ernakulam temple, known as Ernakulathappan locally, is the Sivalinga worshipped by Arjuna. It was Tusath Kaimal, the local ruler who built the present temple. First of Makaram (usually January 14) or *Makarasankranthi* is very important here and the eight-day annual festival starts on this day.

Paravur Mookambika Temple

We have heard about the famous Mookambika temple dedicated to Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, in Karnataka. There is a similar temple in Paravur in Kerala. Paravur was once in Cochin State. Its local ruler, Paravur Thampuran was a great devotee of Goddess Saraswati and often visited the Mookambika temple in the north. When he became too old and weak he could no longer undertake the long journey to Karnataka. He prayed to the Goddess and cried out his heart that he could not have Her darshan.

That very night he had darshan of the Devi in a dream. Accordingly he built a temple at Paravur itself and installed the Goddess there, thus enabling the Thampuran to have daily darshan of the Devi. In due course the temple which is in the centre of a lotus pond came to be known as dakshina Mookambika while the one in Karnataka was referred to as northern Mookambika.

Cochin State later transferred Paravur to Travancore State. As such this temple is now under the administration of the Travancore Devaswom Board.

Navaratri festival, sacred to Goddess Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, is celebrated here. Children are initiated here in large numbers. There is a ten-day annual festival in *Makaram* (January-February starting from the Uttrattati asterism. Like its counterpart in Karnataka here also there is offering of *trimadhuram* (pudding of Banana, sugar and honey) at morning and *kashayam* (an ayurvedic medicine) at night.

Where 108 Deities Meet

Talking of Kerala temples, one cannot ignore the cluster of temples in and around Peruvanam, some 12 km. south of Trichur. According to legend, of the 64 gramams or sections which Parasurama created after reclaiming Kerala from the sea, Peruvanam remained for centuries the greatest.

The Peruvanam temple or Perumtrikkovil was a spiritual and cultural centre and its deity, Lord Siva or Erattayappan as He is locally called, presided over several great deities - Trichur Vadakkunnathan, Triprayar Sri Rama, Cherpu Bhagawati, Kutalamanikyam Bharata, Kodungallur Kurumba, Tiruvanchikulam Mahadeva and others. Four Sastas, Akamalai, Kutiran, Edathurithy and Oozath protected the boundaries while Tiruvullakkavu Sasta temple, a great centre of the scriptures, especially of Yajurveda for centuries, was known for its bewitching melody of the distinctive "Peruvanam style" of Yajurveda which reverberated within the small temple for hours every day.

Erattayappan also enjoyed the 28-day-long festival in March-April which culminated with 108 deities riding big elephants and paying homage to the Lord. Even Kasi Viswanatha, it is believed, used to have the night offerings before dusk that day so that He could come over. This is the famous Arattupuzha Pooram in which over 100 elephants were arrayed for, perhaps, the biggest show in the south.

For the last 14 centuries Triprayar Sri Rama has been presiding over the Pooram now celebrated in a reduced scale. The number of participating deities also came down to fifty-six. The famous Trichur Pooram festival had been formerly associated with the Arattupuzha Pooram. Once due to heavy rains and flooding of roads the Trichur Pooram procession could not proceed up to Arattupuza and had to come back. Hence from next year onwards it was organised at Trichur itself but a month later i.e. in *Medom* (April-May). And with this ten of the gods and goddesses participating in Arattupuzha Pooram broke away. There were further splinter groups with the result now there are only twenty-three gods and goddesses participating in the Arattupuzha event.

The venue is the vast paddy fields near the Arattupuzha Sasta temple. A long alignment of sixty lavishly caparisoned elephants with the Triprayar

Tevar in the middle and Cherpu Bhagawati and Oorakam Ammatiruvati on other side form part of the main show at midnight on the last day culminating in *arattu* in the morning in the river. For the people of central Kerala, this divine get-together is the summit of devotional experience and the belief in olden days was that whoever failed to pay obeisance to the assembly of gods and goddesses here was deemed to be dead!

Balussery Vettakkorumakan

A deity which we have not come across in the various temples described so far is Vettakkorumakan. There are several temples for Sasta and Ayyappa in the old Travancore and Cochin States and only a few for Vettakkorumakan. The opposite is the case in the Malabar area. Some of the well-known temples dedicated to Vettakkorumakan are in North Kerala. These are at Neeleswaram, Kottakal, Nilambur, Balussery etc. because of the fact that he was the family deity of the Rajas of Chirakkal and Neeleswaram and Kottakal. The most famous of these temples is at Balussery Fort, about 25 km. from Calicut. This was once the fort of the Rajas of Kurumbranad.

Who is Vettakkorumakan? There are many who believe that the deity is Kiratamoorty or Siva in the form of hunter. There are others who think it is another form of Ayyappa. The fact is that while Ayyappa was born out of the union of Siva and the Mohini form of Vishnu, Vettakkorumakan is the son of Siva and Parvati.

It is well-known that when Sankara appeared before Arjuna in the form of a hunter to grant him His personal weapon, the Pasupata, Parvati was also with him dressed as a huntress. After giving Arjuna the Pasupata the divine couple wandered in the forest in the same form for some time. During this period they had a son born of extraordinary effulgence and that is Vettakkorumakan or son born during hunting, to put it roughly.

The boy was very mischievous. During his hunting he killed many asuras. But making free use of his bow and arrows he also gave endless trouble to the Devas and Rishis. Unable to bear his mischief they first approached Brahma who expressed his helplessness as the boy was the son of Sankara. Then they besought the help of Sankara Himself who however dismissed them by saying that he being a boy would be naturally naughty and he would be all right when he grew up. As a last resort they approached Mahavishnu who took the form of an old hunter and went to the boy.

Vishnu displayed before the boy a golden *churika*, dragger-cum-sword which was so beautiful that it attracted the boy who begged him to make a present of it. Vishnu agreed provided he would behave in a responsible manner by giving up his bow and started protecting the people instead of harming them. The boy accepted the condition and with the *churika* took

leave of his parents from Kailasa and went to the land of Parasurama. He crossed several mountains and forests and rivers and reached North Kerala where he first entered the Balussery Fort. Hence the importance of the Balussery temple dedicated to Vettakkorumakan though the Lord later visited other places where He was revered and worshipped.

The temple at Balussery is very small without even a flagstaff or altar. The important, *vazhivadu* or offering here is the distribution of meals to those who come here from other places.

Seva or worship and *Pattu* or singing of hymns are important annual festivals here. Seva is usually conducted by prominent persons like Zamorin of Calicut, the Raja of Kadathunad, etc. *Pattu* is celebrated by various persons on different days. There are the usual items like feasting, elephant procession, music etc. during the annual festivals.

Kadampuzha Sri Parvati

There are temples dedicated to Lakshmi, Durga, Badrakali and Saraswati. But one hardly hears of temples with Parvati as the presiding deity. Kadampuzha is one such where the light of Parvati in the form of Kirathi (huntress) in the puranic episode of Siva and Arjuna is worshipped.

Legend has it that once Adi Sankara and his disciples were passing through the place. It was dusk and suddenly they saw a powerful light and heat radiating from an object. No one dared to go near the site.

Sankara prayed to Lord Narasimha and approaching the object found it contracting in size and finally disappearing as a small ball of flame into a hole. Realising that it was the light of Sri Parvati, Sankara implored the divine light to stay and consecrated it on the spot for the sake of humanity.

With the help of a Nambudiri from a nearby illam and a Warrier attendant, Sankara arranged for the daily pujas of the deity. He covered the mouth of the hole with a plantain leaf and made the offering of bright-red *thechi* flowers which were available in plenty in this area.

This was on the day of Karthika in the month of Vrischikam (November-December). Hence the day is considered as the most important at Kadampuzha. So also the offering of *poo-moodal* covering with flowers, which is so popular that it is booked months in advance.

Poo-moodal offering has another significance too. During the fight with Arjuna, Parvati was distressed to see Siva's body covered with arrows showered by Arjuna. She prayed that these arrows be turned into flowers which they did.

Another popular offering at this temple is *Muttu Arackal*, literally removal of obstacles and difficulties caused to devotees and also for the fulfilment of one's desires. The offering consists of breaking of coconuts by the priest in front of the deity. The deity is specially known to offer relief to those who suffer from the ill effects of black magic. Even non-Hindus make offerings here such is the faith.

There is no image of the deity at Kadampuzha. A mirror made of alloy forms the idol in a small Srikoil. In front of it there is a raised platform in

the middle of which there is a Sreechakra and Narasimha chakra installed by Sankaracharya.

The temple itself is unpretentious with no elaborate structure or gopuram, not even a flagstaff which form part of Kerala shrines. But it is set in sylvan surroundings amidst giant trees and a tank. There is no river here as the name Kadampuzha suggests.

Kadampuzha is in Malappuram district about 11 kms from Kottakkal. It is a small village though of late it is well connected by buses because of the increasing popularity of the temple.

Kalpathy Viswanatha Swamy Temple

Sri Viswanatha Swamy temple at Kalpathy in Palakkad is situated on the southern banks of the River Neela. A look at the temple and river bank will remind one of the bathing ghats of Varanasi.

In fact, according to legend, one Lakshmi Ammal, a Brahimin widow from Sekharipuram village, the first Brahmin settlement in the district brought a Bana Lingam from Varanasi and handed it over to the then ruler of Palakkad requesting him to instal and consecrate it in the present location. She also donated 1,000 panams to the ruler and insisted that the puja and other rituals be based on Siva agama as practised in the Mayuram temple in Thanjavur district.

It is interesting to note that even today the famous Car festival in Kalpathy temple synchronises with the annual festival conducted in Mayuram.

Tamil Brahmins or paradesi Brahmins as they are known, migrated from Tamil Nadu some centuries ago and settled in Kerala. Their concentration were in those days mainly in Thiruvanathapuram and Palakkad districts.

The story goes that the Brahmin immigrants to Palakkad especially, were received with respect by the then ruler of Palakkad who were anxious to have them to take care of their temples and guide them in their religious functions. This was because around that time the Nambudiri Brahmins had to flee as they disapproved the action of the then ruler who married a tribal girl.

The Brahmin settlers were mostly Vedic scholars who used the car festival as a means to preserve their Vedic learning and culture. Thus Veda parayanam became a very important part of the car festival. They recited Vedas in their respective villages during the entire Mandalam lasting 41 days and ended it with the celebration of Sastha Preethi.

The Kalpathi Car Festival celebrated from November 7 to 15 every year is as famous as the Rath Yatra of Puri. Logan’s Malabar Manual rates it as the biggest in Malabar and is older than the Thrissur Pooram. The most attractive item of the festival is the pulling of chariots through the streets for three days.

An important ceremony connected with the festival is annabhishekam conducted on full moon day. This is a thanks giving ceremony to God when most families had land to cultivate in olden days. Rice would be offered to the deity in the temple and prayers offered for good crop in the next season as well.

The rice offered is cooked for performing the abhishekam. Later it is deposited in the temple tank or river for the consumption of fish.

Sri Mookambika: Goddess of the Gods

The holy shrine of Sri Mookambika of Kollur in Karnataka is revered as the Goddess of the Gods and attracts hundreds of devotees every day, especially Keralites.

The idol of Saraswathi and the cosmic Sri Chakra were consecrated by the great Adi Sankaracharya himself who also laid down the puja routine which is still followed.

The Sankaracharya is said to have advised Malayalees to visit this shrine of the Goddess of Learning at least once a year, especially during Navaratri. This explains the presence of large number of pilgrims from Kerala in the Karnataka temple which, for the same reason, merits its inclusion in this series devoted to Kerala temples.

In fact, a direct bus service had been started in recent times connecting the temple town of Guruvayur with Kollur to cater to the increasing number of devotees to Mookambika. Even those who stay in distant cities like Bombay and Dubai make it a point to visit Mookambika during their holidays, if not specially during Vijaya Dasami, to conduct Vidyarambham, initiation to learning, for their children.

Kerala's famous artist and painter, Raja Ravi Varma and doyen of Karnatic music, the late Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, to mention two noted examples, are known to have stayed here and observed bhajan to propitiate the Goddess of Learning.

Quite unusually, the Goddess is represented here by a natural lingam of stone with a unique "Suvarna Rekha", a golden streak dividing the image into two unequal halves: the left portion slightly bigger, signifies Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati and the right, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

There is also a subsidiary shrine for Subramanya Swamy (Skanda). By its side there is the famous Saraswathi mantap where the Utsava vigraha of Goddess Saraswathi is brought in procession and offered special worship. Artists and scholars, from far and near flock here and dedicate their learning to the Goddess.

According to one account, Lord Rama is said to have performed Durga puja here before setting out to meet Ravana in battle. Lord Krishna too, came here accompanied by Rukmini and Satyabhama. No wonder why the Sri Mookambika is called Goddess of the Gods.

The sacred river Sowparnika flows near the temple with its crystal clear waters. The river emanates from the awesome Kodachadri peak of the Western Ghats. As the river water filters through medicinal herbs they possess healing power for chronic ailments, it is believed.

Legend has it that the ferocious Kolasura harassed the sages doing penance here. The holymen invoked Goddess Durga to come to their rescue, which she did by striking the demon dumb (‘mooka’) before destroying them. Hence the name “Mookambika”. Kollur near Coondapur town in Karnataka is 150 kms from Managalore.

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